All The Wrong Choices

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All The Wrong Choices

by StratsWrote

Summary

Will Graham has been locked up in the BSHCI, betrayed by the man he loved and determined to bring the truth to light. Meanwhile, Hannibal is dealing with his daughter's increasing frustration with his decisions, while trying to bring Will back into his life. And everyone else is starting to wonder exactly what kind of relationship Will Graham had with Hannibal Lecter.

(Or: The Season 2 AU where Hannibal tries to balance raising a child with serial killing, and Will tries to balance revenge with feelings.)

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She knows now, that she should have done something sooner. Should have said something, should have stepped in and stopped this. All those chances to change things, and she had stood back and watched.

This was as much her fault as it was his. She had let this happen.

Standing in the kitchen, shoes sliding in the slickness of the blood, she looks up at him, and he tells her it's time to go.

And once again, she listens. Because she could have stopped this, but she didn't. And she does not have the courage to do it now.

The first night without Will, Hannibal tucked Michelle into his own bed. Had anyone been around to ask, he might have told them it was to comfort her, to keep her from nightmares. Hannibal has always been an accomplished liar, but he rarely lied to himself. He tucked Michelle into bed with him so that he could reach out and keep hold of the tattered remains of his family, so that he did not feel quite so lonely. He had been alone most of his life, but rarely had he been *lonely*, not since he was young and his family's demise was still fresh.

Now, he was lonely. Now, the walls echoed with Will's after-image. The bed still smelled of him, of his curls and his skin. Once, Hannibal woke in the night and, in his sleep-addled state, reached to pull him close. He obtained a handful of stuffed animal instead.

Hannibal refused to lose sleep over his actions. He had made the best decisions he could, given the circumstances, decisions that would keep him out of prison and Michelle out of foster care. That Will and Abigail were casualties was unfortunate, but unavoidable. Abigail had flipped her own hourglass when she'd dug up Nicholas Boyle's body. She had been running on borrowed time ever since. Hannibal had merely urged her into place a bit sooner.

Will, on the other hand… Will was a loss. A temporary loss, but a loss none the less. He had looked into Hannibal, had seen him, but he had not yet been ready for what he found. And now he would most certainly be upset with Hannibal, betrayed, even. It would be a long time before he was ready to return to Hannibal's arms, and Hannibal was not looking forward to the series of events that would eventually bring him home.

Hannibal refused to lose sleep over things he had already done, things he could not change, but he was losing sleep over the things yet to come. Will was an unknown variable, at all times, unpredictable, chaotic. Hannibal had to set several things into motion at once, to achieve the most favorable outcome. If he was careful, and if Will was not as reckless as he was typically prone to being, Will's encephalitis could prove a favorable excuse. It would be the long way through; Will would still likely be committed, albeit temporarily. A temporary

psychiatric commitment could still take years, however, and while a jailbreak was possible, Hannibal was not yet ready to give up the life he led in Baltimore. Hannibal would work on that plan anyway, but he was not going to pin all his hopes on it.

The ideal would be to frame someone else. It was a shame he'd already killed Sutcliffe, the man was dirty enough to have made the job simple. Hannibal had a few candidates in mind, but this would take more care, more finesse. He would need to avoid alibis, and cherry-pick someone with exactly the right skill set. It would take time, time Hannibal did not want to give. Sending Will to Chilton's care was not a decision Hannibal made lightly, and he wanted him home. For once in his life, Hannibal lacked patience.

There was a third option, a back up plan. An emergency stop. Hannibal still had all the pieces he needed for the copy-cat killer to strike again. But only if he wanted to leave everything up in the air again. And Will would be angry, spiteful. Determined. No, better to have someone else ready to take the fall before letting Will back into the game.

Hannibal spent two nights plotting, drifting in and out of wakefulness, mentally scripting the paths people would take, which choices would lead to which outcomes.

On the third night without Will, Michelle refused to come to bed. Hannibal found her in her own room, hair a mess from where she'd ripped out Hannibal's careful braids, spreading damp patches across her pillowcases.

"I don't want you," She told him. Hannibal was not willing to admit his loneliness to himself, let alone to a second-grader, so he nodded.

"Alright, if you're sure." Hannibal reached for the brush on her dresser, but when he crossed the room to tuck her in, she shook her head.

"I don't *want* you," She repeated, yanking her blankets up to cover her shoulders. She dropped backwards against her pillows, glaring at him. Hannibal stilled.

"You're still angry."

"Yup," Michelle said, popping the 'p' sound in the unpleasantly childish way she'd learned from her classmates. Hannibal had thought her broken of that habit.

Sighing, Hannibal settled himself onto the edge of her bed. She frowned and scooted back until she was all the way on the other side, out of his reach. "This is childish, Michelle."

"I'm a child," She pointed out. This was true, but she was normally a well-behaved one. Michelle had occasional bursts of misbehavior, as any child would, but they tended to be brief explosions, little experiences that Hannibal could temper and redirect as needed. This was calculated, purposeful misbehavior, done out of spite. Michelle's mood had been understandably sour since Will's arrest, but they had discussed it already, and Hannibal had thought she understood.

"Do you think that Will will be appreciative of your attitude when he returns?"

“Will’s not here.”

‘*To defend himself’* went unspoken, but Hannibal could read it in the firm set of Michelle’s jaw. Hannibal frowned at her. “He’ll be home before you know it.”

“That’s a stupid expression, I know it *now.*” Hannibal could find no fault in that argument, which was not the same as approving of it. He tugged at the blankets until he could get his hands under Michelle’s armpits, hoisting her up into his lap.

“You are getting much to big for this.”

“I am *not!*” Michelle protested, clearly determined to disagree with everything Hannibal said tonight.

“You are,” Hannibal told her with a small smile, “But I don’t mind.”

Despite herself, despite her tense posture and angry face, Michelle tucked her head under his chin and snuggled close. Hannibal ran a hand down her back until she relaxed into him, and tried not to think about how his time to coddle her like this was running short.

“I want him to come home,” Michelle whispered against the knot of Hannibal’s tie. “He was here, all the time. He was gonna stay here while he was sick. And now he’s not *anywhere*, and I don’t like it. And you won’t take me to see him.”

“It would be ill-advised.”

“That’s grown-up speak for ‘no.’”

“Yes,” Hannibal confirmed, running his hand through her hair, carefully twining through the knots she’d managed to stir up. “It would never be allowed, and it would draw attention to us.”

“Other people wouldn’t like it if you let me,” Michelle summarized, “They’d think it was bad.”

“Exactly.”

Michelle pushed away to look at him, her face scrunched up in frustration and confusion. “But *why*?”

Hannibal loved this about her, her complete refusal to line up with the way other people thought, with the expectations society would place on her. It was a common trait in children, but Hannibal hoped she never outgrew it. “Because people are foolish,” He told her, shifting her in his lap so he could twine her hair back into its braids, “Because they fear what they don’t understand, and they will not understand Will.”

“But we will,” Michelle said, some of her confidence slipping back into place, “I’m not afraid of Will.”

“Nor am I. We will understand him, and he will understand us, and eventually things will be better. I promised you, didn’t I?”

“You did.” Michelle tilted her head back to look at him, hesitancy written over her features. “You always keep your promises.”

“I do. May I tuck you in, now?”

“Okay.”

When he was being processed, Will had told Jack about Hannibal. Or tried to, at least. The words had stuck in his throat, sour and sharp enough to cut his mouth on the way out. That Hannibal could frame him, could hurt Abigail, could be a *murderer*, it went against everything Will knew about him. But now, Will was realizing he knew absolutely nothing about Hannibal Lecter. Nothing true. Nothing *real*.

They weren’t going to find anything. Will knew that as surely as he knew his own innocence. Hannibal’s crime scenes were too tidy, too meticulous. Any evidence they found would only lead them straight back to Will. But Will told Jack anyway, if only to get him to look at Will with anything other than that horrified, pitying expression. Will would take fear, would suffer through Jack thinking he was losing his mind. He couldn’t stomach the pity.

Hannibal had been his first visitor, and he had brought pity with him. Pity and shame and a mockery of guilt, though Will knew he would call it guilt over failure, not guilt over anything he’d done. Hannibal had stood beyond the bars and reached for Will, and Will had placed himself just out of arm’s length. There was something almost painfully hilarious in that, in the fact that now that Hannibal had successfully trapped him, Will was able to free himself from his grasp. He was locked away, sealed up tight, but finally free from Hannibal’s pervasive influence.

That anger carried him all the way through the first night and the better part of the second day, through ‘conversations’ with Chilton, which Will skillfully ignored, and through meals that tasted bland and threatened to come back up when Will realized what he was comparing them to. It lasted him right up until exhaustion finally claimed him, sliding him into sleep, still sitting propped up against the wall of his cell.

His dreams were a haze of blood and memory, damp and slick between his fingers, shifting and sliding in and out of reach. Abigail, looking up at him with a mouthful of red. Hannibal, holding on to him and whispering in his ear that he would be okay, that Hannibal would make it okay, would make it better. Hannibal’s knife across his throat and Will’s across Abigail’s.

Will woke in the night, quietly sobbing and achingly alone.

They were pretending to be normal again. Michelle hated it. Without Will and Abigail to pick her up, she spent a lot of time at latchkey, which was boring, but she also got to tag along with Tėtis everywhere, which was better. And Miss Bedelia came for dinner.

Miss Bedelia was a psychiatrist, just like Tėtis. She was *Tėtis's* psychiatrist, actually. Tėtis said sometimes everyone needed a little bit of help. Usually, Tėtis went to her home for his sessions, but there was no longer anyone to babysit Michelle, so now she came to their house instead.

Miss Bedelia had come to their house all the time, when Michelle was new. She and Michelle would sit in the family room, and sometimes Miss Bedelia would watch her play dolls and ask her questions about them. The first psychiatrist Tėtis took her to, the one Michelle didn't like and only had to see twice, had wanted the dolls to be Mommy and Daddy and Michelle and Baby Asher. Miss Bedelia let Michelle call the dolls whatever she liked, and have whatever adventures Michelle wanted them to. She would play too, helping Michelle make up stories. Michelle thought Miss Bedelia must be very good at being sneaky, because she knew how to make the stories about Mommy and Daddy without them *actually* being about Mommy and Daddy. So Miss Bedelia got to know whatever it was she wanted to know about Before, and Michelle didn't have to straight out tell things she didn't want to tell. Everybody won.

One day, when she was all grown up, Michelle wanted to be as sneaky as Miss Bedelia. And as pretty. Miss Bedelia had soft, pretty waves in her hair, and she wore pretty shoes, and she always smelled like something good, something sweet and not too fake. Sometimes, Miss Bedelia and Tėtis would look at each other all funny like grown ups did, and before Will, Michelle thought, *maybe.* But there was no Before Will, anymore, and Miss Bedelia was not here for Michelle.

Miss Bedelia was not here for dinner, either, although they did that anyway. Tėtis liked to feed people. He liked the performance, and he liked to watch people eat. So of course they had dinner, first, and then Tėtis sent Michelle to her room to play, while he and Miss Bedelia shut themselves in the family room.

Miss Bedelia was a psychiatrist, and that meant she was a doctor, and Michelle knew about Important Doctor Things like HIPPA and Patient Confidentiality. But if Tėtis *really* didn't want Michelle to know what they were talking about, he wouldn't be talking about it in their home, or he would have at least waited until Michelle went to bed, like he did when Will stayed to talk. Or he would have told Michelle, in private, that she was not to be listening. If he didn't do any of those things, it stood to reason that he expected Michelle to practice.

Miss Bedelia was Good. She was not a threat, so Michelle didn't bring a knife. Slowly, carefully, and most importantly *quietly*, Michelle crept along the hall with a big glass of water. She tilted it over on one of the bottom steps, letting the water spill down to the floor, and then propped the glass on it's side on the steps. Then she propped herself outside the family room with a handful of paper towels and listened.

It was very difficult to hear. Miss Bedelia had a soft, murmuring voice. She spoke at exactly the volume she needed to, and no louder. Half of what she said drifted past Michelle in a faint buzz, but Michelle heard the important stuff.

"-*obsessed* with Will Graham," Miss Bedelia said in her whisper-voice.

“Will Graham is my friend,” Tètis told her, and Michelle was almost affronted until he continued, “He is my family. My...”

“You are not in love with Will Graham,” Miss Bedelia said, and Michelle was suddenly flooded with a wave of *hatred* for Miss Bedelia, where there had never been any before. “You are *fascinated* by him,” Miss Bedelia continued, “You are intrigued by him, and you are allowing him to manipulate you.”

“Will is incarcerated. He is alone, and he is lonely. It is only natural that he want a visit.”

“But to want a visit from *you*? When he claims it is you who put him where he is? There is something in Will Graham that you relate to, that you admire, Hannibal, but his intent to manipulate you is clear.”

“There is more to Will than manipulation.”

“And if you go, you betray your intent to manipulate *him*, for whatever-” Miss Bedelia went quiet, and this was the hard part about eavesdropping. There were no faces to compare to her flashcards. All the little tics that translated to emotion, things that already baffled Michelle but were at least *something,* were gone. Michelle had no idea what Miss Bedelia saw in Tètis’s face, but Miss Bedelia, thankfully, kept speaking.

“You did not mention you were… *close* with Will Graham.

“You did not ask.”

“It’s been a while since you had an affair, Hannibal.

“Will is not an affair.”

“You have never been prone to more than that.”

There was something in what they were saying that was beyond Michelle, something Grown Up. Miss Bedelia’s voice curled oddly around Will’s name, unpleasant and stinging. Michelle didn’t like it, didn’t want to hear any more of it. She mopped up the spilled water and hurried back to her room.

Abigail stands beside him in the stream, water rushing about her knees.

“*Are you still mad at me?” She asks, with bright, hopeful eyes.*

“*I couldn’t stay mad at you,” Will promises, “You did what you had to do to survive. I just wish you’d told me sooner. Maybe I could have...” He trails off, staring out at his line as it twists against the current.*

“*No,” Abigail says softly, thoughtfully. “No, you couldn’t have.”*

“*I guess not,” Will replies, choking on the bitterness of it all, “I guess he was always going to do exactly what he wanted.”*

"*But what was it he wanted?"*

"*He wanted to play with us," Will spits, still so mad, still shaking with the rage that floods him, "And he got* ***exactly*** *what he wanted."*

Abigail looks at him. She glances back towards the shore, where Michelle bounds among the dogs, fly-away hair in tangles around her face, dark eyes bright with joy. Will thinks he would have brought her here, when she was older. When she grew into the patience children lacked, he and Abigail both could teach her.

Abigail's fingers trail over her lure, over the sharp point. She looks back at Will, wide-eyed and questioning. "Did he, though?" She asks.

Will turns his back to her and waits for the fish to bite.

Will had asked for it, had all but demanded it, actually. And yet, he was unprepared for the sharp stab of hurt that jolted through him when Hannibal came to stand beyond the bars of Will's cell.

"Hello, Will," Hannibal said, like he had the first time. And, just like the first time, Will responded:

"Dr. Lecter."

There was a distance to them both, now. Hannibal was not playing the role of the grieving spouse, not this time, and his walls were back in place. He was a good actor; He looked as though he was absolutely distraught to see Will here, and was merely doing an excellent job of hiding it. It would fool anyone with a surface knowledge of Hannibal.

Will had more than a surface knowledge of Hannibal, and so, when Hannibal flinched at Will's use of his last name, Will was not deceived.

"Will," Hannibal said, stressing the syllables of Will's name, "When you were committed, Dr. Chilton assured me you would be allowed to receive phone calls. I have called you every night, and you have refused me."

"I wanted to see you face to face," Will told him, and he would have relished the look of longing on Hannibal's face, had it been real.

"We would have appreciated the call," Hannibal insisted, and Will knew the use of 'we' was not accidental. It was perfectly sharpened, aimed towards Will's heart.

"Chilton monitors my phone calls," Will said, instead of saying any of the violent things that had welled up in his chest, "I'm sure he's not the only one who would disapprove of me reading bedtime stories through the phone." And he didn't want Chilton listening to her. He wanted nothing of his time in here to touch Michelle. He would keep her in his stream, separate and safe from the feathered stags that stalked the halls.

"You do not have to go through this alone, Will."

Will laughed, bitter and sharp. “I was already alone.” This time, the flinch doesn’t look quite so faked. It unsettles Will, that even now Hannibal can make Will think he has *feelings*, that everything isn’t just some game to him. Every move carefully calculated to make Will think Hannibal is human.

“If you felt alone, if I was not providing you enough comfort, you could have told me, Will.”

“I didn’t feel alone *then.”* The words tumbled free, lost to the air before Will could choke them back. He was disgusted with himself for falling for it, for offering Hannibal anything resembling *comfort*. “It’s only now that I look back...” Will shook his head, laughing. “I was alone, but I’ll never be alone again. I used to hear my thoughts as if I was speaking them out loud, my own cadence and timbre. Now all I hear is *you*. I can’t get you out of my head.”

“Sometimes, in a relationship, one may begin to feel as if they are no longer a separate-”

“Is that what you think we had,” Will interrupted, just to relish the flash of irritation that stole across Hannibal’s face, “A relationship? A relationship requires equality, *Doctor*, it requires communication.”

“Will,” Hannibal said softly, “I have never been with anyone the way I have been with you.”

“No.” Will snapped, striding forward towards the bars, “No, you don’t get to do that, not now. No more conversations with double meanings I don’t get.”

“All of our conversations were only ever about opening your eyes to the truth of who you are.”

“I know who I am, “Will said in a whisper, close enough now to drop his voice and perhaps avoid Chilton’s microphones, if Will was lucky (Will was never lucky), “And I know who *you* are. I don’t remember what you did to me, Hannibal, but it’s here, in my head, and I will *find it*. And when I remember, there will be a *reckoning*.”

“I have nothing but faith in you, Will.” Hannibal said, and there was another double meaning there, Will could feel it lurking beyond the walls Hannibal propped up. Another expression, another mock-up of heartache that Will wanted to claw off of Hannibal’s face with his own bare hands. Will turned his back on him.

“Practice,” Tėtis told her when they pulled up to the police tape, “Listen, observe, but do not disobey.” Small and unassuming, that was Michelle. “Will I be allowed to come look?”

“Not at all,” Tėtis told her, “They will be very displeased that I’ve brought you. But I will trade you information later, when we are alone.”

“Quid pro quo,” Michelle chirped, and earned Tėtis’s special, pleased smile.

Mr. Crawford was there, without pretty Bella Bella Bella. Bella didn’t work for the FBI. Neither did Tėtis, technically, but that didn’t seem to stop him. Very little seemed to stop Tėtis.

“Dr. Lecter, thank you for joining us...” Mr. Crawford trailed off, looking at Michelle with his grumpy face. His face was always grumpy, but this one was *particularly* grumpy. Michelle tucked herself out of sight behind Tėtis’s pant leg. “Dr. Lecter, this is hardly a place for children.”

“I’m afraid I’ve yet to find a regular sitter,” Tėtis informed him, “Especially on such short notice.”

“She can’t go back there, it’s...” Mr. Crawford trailed off, because grown-ups never seemed to want to talk about scary stuff in front of Michelle, even though she could take it. She’d seen scary stuff before.

“She won’t. She’ll stay on the other side of the tape, where I can see her.”

“Dr. Lecter, I know she’s a good kid, but-”

“Don’t worry about it, Jack.” A pretty, dark haired lady ducked under the yellow tape, tugging latex gloves off her hand. She knelt down, smiling at Michelle. “You’ve got Zeller and Price to explain things, you can spare me for fifteen minutes while Dr. Lecter takes a look.” To Tėtis, she added, “I’ve got little sisters. She’s safe with me.”

“I have the utmost faith in you, Miss Katz,” Tėtis told her. He and Mr. Crawford disappeared behind the police tape, and Miss Katz held out her hand for Michelle to shake, like Michelle was a *grown up*.

“Beverly Katz,” Miss Katz told her.

“Michelle Elizabeth Lecter,” Michelle said in her most grown up voice. It made Miss Beverly’s face crinkle up in a smile, and that made Michelle smile too.

“Well, Michelle Elizabeth Lecter. Ever see the inside of an ambulance?”

Miss Beverly reminded Michelle of Nina, but only in the good ways, not the ways that pinched inside and made Michelle feel sick. She held Michelle’s hand really tight, keeping her close as they went over to on of the ambulances. Michelle knew from Tėtis that they always called ambulances to scenes like this, but she guessed they didn’t really need them if everyone was dead.

Miss Beverly was distracting. She showed Michelle all the little nooks and crannies inside the ambulance, and let her touch anything that wasn’t sharp. But Michelle got to observe anyway. There were people everywhere. The ambulance driver was a man with a dark tan all over, except for a thin little sliver on his left hand. That meant he *was* married, but he wasn’t anymore, and Michelle filed that away to trade with Tėtis later. She also filed away the names of Miss Beverly’s little sisters, and how many individual cops were walking back and forth just beyond the police tape, and that Miss Beverly missed Will almost as much as Michelle did.

That one took a little more work to figure out.

“Are there bodies?” Michelle asked, stalling Miss Beverly where she was demonstrating an oxygen mask.

“Yeah,” Miss Beverly said after a moment, “Yeah, kiddo, we found some bodies.”

“Did you get to look at them?”

Miss Beverly sat down next to Michelle on the stretcher, staring out at the police tape with her. “I did,” she said slowly, “That’s my job. I look at bodies and try to figure out what put them there.”

“That used to be Will’s job,” Michelle said, swinging her feet.

“Close. Will and I had different parts of the same job. We were… We were a team.”

“When Will comes back, I’m gonna have him teach me how to look at bodies so I can be like him when I grow up.” This was the real test. Michelle was not stupid. She knew what people thought Will did, and she knew what most grown ups would say to that. Miss Beverly was not like most grown ups. She didn’t tell Michelle that Will was never coming back, like her teacher had said, not even in that soft voice grown ups used to say bad things in nice ways. Instead, she settled her hand on Michelle’s shoulder and nodded.

“I think that would be a really good job,” Miss Beverly said, and Michelle smiled up at her. When Will came back, she would tell him that Miss Beverly was Good.

At home, Michelle repeated back everything she’d observed to Tėtis. In return, he laid out three pictures for her.

Michelle had seen dead bodies before, but these ones were weird. They almost didn’t look like people at all, slightly off from their preparation and their time in the water, discolored and cracked. It made it easier to look at them.

“What do you see?” Tėtis asked. This was not part of the game. She didn’t have to look if she didn’t want to. Tėtis had traded her these pictures because she’d asked for them, because she wanted to know what Tėtis and Will did.

“They’re all wrong,” Michelle told him, “The colors and the lines. All cracked up like when you step on something plastic.”

“Their time in the water discolored their features and eroded some of the preservative,” Tėtis explained, “What else do you see?”

Michelle frowned and turned the pictures back and forth. “Somebody poked holes in ‘em,” She said finally.”

“They did. What about patterns, similarities?”

Michelle looked and looked and looked, until her eyes went all blurry and she felt tired from the seeing. “They don’t have any. They’re all different.”

Tėtis smiled at her, a real smile, and traded her a plate of pie for the pictures.

When Alana came to visit, she looked at Will like he was something breakable. Something fragile. She had never looked at him like that before, even standing in his living room, looking like she wanted to kiss Will and *didn't* want to kiss Will, all at the same time. She looked at Will like he was unstable, yes, but not *breakable.* But now, he guessed, he was already broken.

She'd promised to try and help him recover the memories that had sunk beneath the surface of his mind, but Will couldn't relax into it. He couldn't trust her, couldn't latch on to an affection that had once been there. He'd pushed that aside in favor of Hannibal. Hannibal had taken everything Will had, and somehow, he had kept it.

The session was useless, but later, in bed, Will sank beneath the weight of his own aching. He sat at Hannibal's table, and the stag watched him from across the room as Hannibal grew horns and fangs and reached out to sink his claws into Will.

And alongside them both, Michelle ate quietly from her plate, until every bite was gone and all that remained was the ear.

When Will woke, this time he vomited, heaving up every bite of dinner he'd managed to stomach.

Hannibal was going to ruin her. Perhaps he already had. Michelle trusted him implicitly, followed him with an adoring little smile and clung to Hannibal as if he could keep her safe. As if he could protect her from the monsters when he was a monster himself. If he told Michelle to follow in his footsteps, she would.

Hannibal had destroyed Will, reached into him and twisted him inside out. Will would not let him destroy Michelle, too.

Fredrick Chilton was a jealous, vain little man, and he was bad with children. He'd managed to upset Michelle within five minutes of being in the house, patting her once on the head like she was some sort of dog and then ignoring her entirely. She was unpleasant enough that Hannibal set her up at her crafts table for dinner, safe in the family room away from the temptation to lose her temper, something that had been happening with increasing frequency.

"No observations tonight," Hannibal warned her, kissing her forehead gently.

"But he saw Will!" She protested, as Hannibal had known she would.

"I promise to share with you everything you wish to know about Will. But stay away from the dining room. Am I understood, Michelle?"

Michelle was well-practiced in seeking loopholes, but she would not do it with him. She nodded her agreement, although she did turn her cheek when he attempted to bestow another

kiss. Hannibal let her do it. Forcing affection on her when she was already angry would only make her feel more frustrated and out of control, and it would detract from the attention he needed to bestow on Fredrick.

“Alana Bloom came to visit,” Fredrick told him, after the meal had begun and they’d both been plied with wine. “She was attempting to help Will dig up buried memories.”

“And was he successful?” Hannibal already knew the answer. If he had been, it would have proved nothing, but at the very least Jack would have been by with questions.

“Only in playing Dr. Bloom. He’s got the good doctor wrapped around his little finger. I wonder what it is with him and psychiatrists?” Fredrick looked up at Hannibal, calculating. It was not a look Hannibal enjoyed being on the receiving end of, and he felt a moment of sympathy for poor Will.

“Are you implying something, Fredrick?”

“You’re all he ever talks about. Not to me, obviously,” Fredrick added with a bitter glare down at his plate, “God forbid he talk to the psychiatrist actually *assigned* to his case. But to anyone else who will listen. He thinks you’re a monster.”

“Will is currently under a lot of stress. It’s only natural that he seeks to assign blame, to control some aspect of reality as he perceives it.”

“He is *obsessed* with you,” Fredrick insisted, “Hannibal Hannibal *Hannibal*. He looks so betrayed. It’s a remarkably good bit of acting.”

“If you have something to ask me, I’d much prefer you do so.”

“Were you sleeping with Will Graham?” The question came sharp and quick. No doubt, Fredrick had expected it to shock Hannibal, to catch him off guard. Perhaps it might have, had Hannibal been anyone else, and had Fredrick not been the type of person to telegraph his every thought so clearly.

“If you were hoping to catch me in an ethical violation, Fredrick, I’m afraid I’ll have to disappoint you.” After all, Will had never officially been his patient.

Fredrick stared him down. Hannibal knew what his suspicions were, but to give him what he wanted offered Hannibal neither advantage nor disadvantage. Rather, it would have made Fredrick smugly pleased at his own guess, and Hannibal did not have the patience for that tonight.

“The truth comes for us all, Dr. Lecter,” Fredrick finally said, “We can only run from it for so long.”

Alana had visited Will out of pity. Beverly had visited him out of desperation. Will wasn’t entirely sure what Jack had hoped to achieve from his visit. Absolution, perhaps, but Will was fresh out.

Alone again with his thoughts, Will laid back on his cot and stared at the ceiling. If Hannibal's intent had been to isolate Will here, he had been unsuccessful. There was no one in his corner, not yet, but Beverly would look. And eventually, if she was careful, Beverly would *see*.

Jack didn't believe him, not yet. He saw Will as damaged, perhaps broken by Jack's own hand. Alana saw Will as something to be fixed. But Will saw himself with perfect clarity, now. No more encephalitis to cloud the mind. No more distractions in the form of false families.

(And if he missed it, if he dreamed of it…

If, in the stream of his mind, he braided Michelle's hair and told her stories…

If he talked to Abigail about trips they would never take…

If he dreamed, in the night, of big hands on his skin, of heat around him and over him and feeling, for the first time, like he was desired, like he was loved…

Well, nobody saw any of that, but him.)

"You know what?" Shannon asked. She and Michelle were nearly the same size, even though Michelle was a little older, and so they almost always got paired up at Michelle's Judo lessons. It had been fun at first, when they were sort-of friends, but now it was just upsetting. And Nina wasn't even there to make faces at her over Shannon's shoulder. Tėtis took Michelle instead, and that meant she couldn't even go to every class, because Tėtis was so busy. Everything good about Judo had been ruined, and Shannon never seemed to *shut up*.

"What?" Michelle asked, looking away in favor of watching the instructor demonstrate. She never liked eye contact to begin with, and it always made Shannon angry when she felt ignored. Michelle was in the kind of mood where making Shannon angry seemed like fun.

"I heard Mommy and Daddy talking about how your dad's crazy boyfriend went to jail."

"He didn't go to *jail*," Michelle said, because he didn't. Tėtis said he was in a State Hospital, and that was not the same thing, even if Will wasn't allowed to leave.

"Did too! Daddy said so." Shannon's hand swung out and smacked at Michelle's shoulder. "Hey, I'm talking to you."

Michelle thought of Tėtis and how calmly he spoke to people who made his face all tense. She channeled him when she answered. "I'm aware." In the corner of her eye, Shannon stomped her foot. Michelle did that too, sometimes, when she was upset, but right now she could pretend she didn't and let herself feel superior.

"You should look at people when they're talking to you! Daddy says!"

"I don't really care what your Daddy says."

“Just because *your* Daddy’s crazy. His boyfriend’s crazy and he’s crazy, and you’re crazy too. They’re gonna take you away and lock you up.”

The rage bubbled beneath Michelle’s skin. She didn’t know what to do with it all. She’d never been an angry person before, not like this, always losing herself to her emotions. She couldn’t seem to keep it straight anymore. She turned to Shannon, on the teacher’s signal, a signal Shannon had not been paying attention to. In a quick, well-practiced motion, Michelle hauled Shannon around her side to throw her to the ground.

The shocked gasp that ripped itself free of Shannon’s chest was reward enough, but Michelle had been taught by her Tėtis and her Nina how to use every weapon at her disposal. She leaned forward and made herself look Shannon dead in the eyes.

“Your Daddy has a girlfriend,” Michelle whispered, because Shannon’s Mommy was always loud on the phone, and Michelle was a much better observer than Shannon was, “Your daddy got bored and met a new lady, and your mommy is gonna file for divorce, and it’s *all your fault*.” And then, before Shannon could say anything, Michelle let her bad ankle give way and ‘accidentally’ fell into Shannon, elbow first, driving all of her weight into Shannon’s stomach.

Shannon’s shriek didn’t make Michelle feel *good*, but she wasn’t going to say anything else about Will, and that was what really mattered.

And if Tėtis told her later that it was beneath her, that she was better than that, better than Shannon, well…

Tėtis, Michelle was beginning to realize, was not right about *everything*.

Chapter End Notes

Hello everybody and welcome to Chapter 1 of All The Wrong Choices!

First things first, I would be remiss if I didn't point out that the title was vaguely inspired by Lemony Snicket's 'All The Wrong Questions.' It was an accidental inspiration, and this fic and that series have absolutely nothing to do with each other, so don't worry about it.

So, we get our first glimpse of just how badly Hannibal has fucked up! Everyone is feeling pretty betrayed, right now. Including, bizarrely, *Hannibal*, who has absolutely no right.

This should go without saying, but Hannibal is doing some bad parenting. Please don't participate in Take Your Daughter To Work Day if your work is 'look at all the dead bodies I found!'

Last time around, I know a couple people were unsurprised but still sad by the ending. Somebody tagged their bookmark of Family of Choice with 'Bad Ending,' and even though I knew what they meant, I still cringed a little. I didn't want to spoil anything, but I also didn't want to mislead people into thinking I WASN'T going to end FoC where Season One ended, so I kind of just didn't say anything. This time, I'm starting ATWC out with a warning, but I'm making it as spoiler free as possible. This is your warning: The Choices series started out as me watching the show and going 'yes, but what if ALSO there was a child?' It was originally intended to be a series of drabbles, which I eventually broke free of. There were originally going to be NO changes to the original plot. That... Is not quite what is happening anymore. So, on the one hand, in the interest of honesty, this is a Season 2 AU. There WILL be a Season 3 AU, which means this fic might not end on the happiest of endings. On the other hand, we have already started to see some butterfly effect. People may get hurt who did not get hurt in the show, as Alana did in the end of FoC. People may survive who didn't in the show (At least one reader noted that, with Hannibal deciding to get Will help for his encephalitis, he never did get around to killing Georgia because Will never had time to form a friendship with her. You are all free to assume Georgia got the help she needed and was declared Not Guilty for Reasons at her trial). The events of Mizumono are not gonna go down the way they did in the show. And that is all I'm going to say because I hate spoiling, but I didn't want to lead anybody on.

Last time around we focused mainly on Hannibal's relationship with Will, and Will's relationship with Michelle/Abigail. This time around, we are getting a peak at exactly how Hannibal has been raising this child. We're also going to see that the kids are NOT alright. But you'll have to wait a bit before we read more of that!

Lastly (God I hope it's lastly, I hope I'm not forgetting things in my rush to get things posted before work,) This fic now has art! My best friend has helpfully provided a picture of Michelle, which can be seen here and in Chapter 2 of FoC!

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> A scene people requested (but I've been planning it since the beginning, honestly).
> Warnings for violent nightmare imagery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Michelle was having night terrors again. They'd always come on and off, but as the years went on, they'd slowly become rarer.

Now they came nearly every night. Hannibal had been forced to pick up a package of overnight pull-ups, something they hadn't kept in the house since Michelle was six years old. The package had been greeted with an explosive tantrum, kicking and screaming and reminding Hannibal over and over again how all of this was his fault.

"You ruined everything," Michelle had told him, as he rocked her gently back and forth, trying to soothe her rage, "You ruined everything, *you* wear them."

Hannibal couldn't give her that, but he could give her something else she wanted.

Michelle had grown more and more tense during the drive to the cliff-house, excitement and apprehension at war on her face. Abigail was far too well behaved to meet them outside, but Hannibal caught a flutter at one of the windows, and Michelle had no such patience. She bolted for the house the second she was free of the car, yanking and tugging at the locked door until Abigail managed to let them both in.

"You were gone forever!" Michelle whined, muffled from how she'd buried her face into Abigail's stomach. Abigail returned the hug with equal ferocity, then tugged Michelle up into her arms. She wobbled slightly under Michelle's weight, not quite as strong as Hannibal or Will.

"It's just a couple of weeks, Shelly," Abigail promised her, "Two weeks, that's not long at all, is it?"

"It's forever!" Michelle insisted, shaking her head. "And Tėtis kept saying 'not now, not now,' but he wouldn't say *when*." She tilted her head to give Hannibal a dirty look, as if his trickery hadn't kept Abigail safe, as if he was not the one who'd given Abigail a place to live and then driven Michelle here himself.

But Hannibal can hardly expect logic from a frightened, stressed child, even one as typically brilliant as Michelle. If he is honest with himself, he would let her say a thousand more things against him just to put that smile on her face once more. Michelle beams up at Abigail as if Abigail is a goddess and not just a girl, the last traces of their family together at last.

Hannibal held up the bags they'd brought. "Lemon-basted salmon and asparagus?" He offered, leading the way to the kitchen. Abigail made an obscene noise behind him, causing Michelle to burst into giggles.

"I've missed your cooking," Abigail said, setting Michelle down at the table while Hannibal laid out the meal, "Mine's rough, and it's not getting any better."

"All things come in time," Hannibal promised her, "We will work together, and you will be wonderful." Trust had not yet returned to Abigail's eyes, when she looked at him, but she still blossomed beautifully under instruction and praise. At the very least, she still smiled when she looked at him, which was more than he could say for the rest of their little family.

Later, after they had eaten and tidied everything away, they went outside to stand by the edge of the bluff.

"Not too close," Abigail warned Michelle, who had always been fascinated by the sound of the waves. Michelle nodded her agreement and wandered off, throwing little stones over the edge.

"I changed the IV bag, like you showed me," Abigail said. Hannibal noticed that she no longer waited for Michelle to be out of earshot before speaking, adjusting herself to their family dynamics. She had finally learned that Michelle would know exactly what she wanted to know, and nothing less, regardless of the efforts of the adults around her. Hannibal had raised her that way.

"Did she wake?"

"Not even for a second," Abigail promised, "I thought she might. I know you said she wouldn't, but I just… I couldn't get it out of my head, until it was over.

"Occasionally, I adjust the cocktail," Hannibal said, "If there are things I need to work on. For the most part, however, she's been very steady."

Abigail was quiet for a moment, watching Michelle skip her stones across the paved courtyard and into the sea. Hannibal could see the secrets welling up behind Abigail's eyes, wary and cautious.

"Keeping things bottled up will only hurt you in the long run," He told her. Abigail flinched, but then straightened up to her full height. She was prettier with this confidence. Fear and anxiety didn't suit her, and Hannibal intended to train her out of them entirely.

"It was kind of creepy. Is it okay to say that it was creepy?"

"All feelings are valid," Hannibal assured her, "And I would hope you would feel comfortable sharing yours with me." When she still didn't look at him, he added, "You have already earned my forgiveness, Abigail. You needn't try so hard."

Abigail looked at him then, eyes wide and damp. "What about *Will's* forgiveness?" There was the source of her worry, as expected. Hannibal took a chance and wrapped his arm around her

shoulder. A few weeks ago, she might have resisted, but now she tucked herself up under his arm and let him comfort her.

“Will does not have it in him to be mad at you,” Hannibal promised, “And I have it on very good authority that he blames me for the entire incident.”

“Only because he thinks I’m dead. When he finds out I lied to him...”

Hannibal cupped her chin and guided her to look up. “Then he will be relieved to see you breathing, and, I’m certain, angry at me all over again.” He kissed Abigail’s forehead, like he did with Michelle before bed, and only released her when she began to smile.

“He might be angry at you for a while,” Abigail warned.

“It was the only way. Eventually, he will understand that.”

Abigail didn’t look as if she entirely believed him, but the anxiety that had tightened her features was gone. She was remarkably mature for seventeen, but she still held some of the shortsightedness of youth; so long as she was out of trouble, Hannibal could deal with his own problems.

“I would like you to come home with us,” Hannibal finally said, when the silence had become companionable once more.

“The FBI...”

“Are not going to find the basement,” Hannibal replied, “And should they, then we will have much bigger problems than whether or not they find you there.”

“I don’t want to be trapped,” Abigail whispered.

“You won’t be. Hide only as a last resort. I confess, I much prefer you untethered.”

“All of us,” She corrected with a small smile, “You like to see what we make of ourselves.”

“Very much so.”

They stared out at the sea together, serene silence but for the crashing of waves and Michelle’s occasional excited laughter. After a moment, Abigail leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder, seeking approval and affection that Hannibal was happy to give to her.

“We should check on her, before we leave,” Abigail said, “Make sure I’ve got her set up right, since I won’t be here to change things tomorrow.”

“Can I come?” Michelle piped up, peering up at them with her hands full of stones. They both stared back at her, a heavy silence that meant something different for each of them. Michelle had never expressed interest in the basement before. On the contrary, she had been wary and mistrustful of even the door. Hannibal was not entirely sure she knew what was kept there, or even had suspicions beyond a hazy childhood imagination. She had never asked, and he had never told. He wouldn’t lie to her, but it was best to keep information to a

minimum if she didn't seek it out. There were already too many things she was expected to remember. She was accomplished at deception, but she was only eight.

Abigail found her voice first. "Absolutely not," She said, glancing at Hannibal with a sudden spark of fear, as if she expected to be overruled. Hannibal had intended to say yes, but undermining Abigail in front of Michelle would only cause problems in the long run, and he had no burning desire to sate that curiosity yet, besides.

Michelle pouted, widening her eyes and fluttering in her lashes in a way that worked on teachers and strangers, but had never worked on Hannibal, or at least, rarely. He encouraged it anyway, as he encouraged any attempt at manipulation that was not too heavy handed, but not within their family. If it worked on Abigail, he would step in and redirect, and reconsider leaving them alone together until Abigail's parental instincts were more finely honed.

Abigail, however, had not been lying or exaggerating when discussing her babysitting history. She put both hands on her hips and stared Michelle down until Michelle dropped both the pout and her stones, nudging them back into the dirt with her sneakers.

"Absolutely not," Abigail repeated, "But you can help me pack while Tėtis goes. I have a treat for you in the kitchen."

They went together, Michelle's tiny hand in Abigail's, and Hannibal watched them with something warm and tight in his chest. Fondness and melancholy, a twist of uncertainty. Things he was unused to feeling, things he didn't entirely understand.

His certainty eroded like the sea eroded the cliff.

"I felt so betrayed," Will had said.

"*I needed to trust you."*

"*I'm so confused.*

"*I need your help*."

It was amazing, how easy it was to lie by telling the truth. The words had tumbled out of Will's mouth with tears to season them, and they had been so, so easy. Maybe it was Hannibal, face to face with him, looking for all the world as if Will's suffering was his own. The lines of the Hannibal he'd known and the real Hannibal overlapped and blurred, until Will saw them as one man. It made the crying come effortlessly.

Back in his cell, however, Will shut down, blocked out reality, and locked himself away.

"It's yucky," Michelle tells him, snatching her hands back from the bait. They flap at her sides, not anxious, but excited. "Yucky and slimy and gross."

"*I'll do it," Will tells her, threading the hook, "You just hold steady."*

She's too little for fly-fishing. The river would come to her chest and overtake her. Will amends his fantasy to a lake from his childhood, the edge of the dock, and gives her a little girl's rod, purple and sparkly. He's seen them with cartoon characters at Wal-Mart, but he's not entirely sure she watches TV. There are gaps in his image of her, he fills them with hopes and wraps his memories around them.

"*Draw back now," He says, and guides her through the motions. She casts further than she expects to, and the glee lights up her face.*

She is a wild-eyed child, excitable, but happy to be held. In his lake, Will imagines that patience extends to this, standing at the edge of the water and dangling her feet over the side, too small to disrupt the water and scare the fish. Will kneels beside her and guides her hand, watching the spark in her eyes as the rod jerks in her hand.

"*I got something!" She shrieks. Will covers her little hand with his own and helps her reel it in, something small, something she could fish up herself, a tiny little trout on the end of her line.*

"*Can we show Tėtis?" She asks, because she would, even in his safe place, Will cannot pretend she wouldn't.*

And Hannibal… And Hannibal would have packed a picnic, would have sat on the shore and sketched the two of them, and…

And he does not belong here, in Will's safety, not anymore, but Will cannot make him ***leave****.*

"Were you sleeping with Dr. Lecter?" Chilton's voice, emotionless and knife-sharp, shattered Will's reverie. Will had forgotten him entirely, wading into fantasy from the very beginning of the session. They had sessions every day, sometimes more than once, if Chilton was feeling particularly ornery. There were only so many times Will was willing to consciously listen to inane questions. *How long have you experienced violent urges? Did your parents ever strike you? Tell me about your upbringing. How does that make you* ***feel?*** Will felt hungry and bored, but that was rarely the desired response.

"Why, are you jealous?" They hadn't hidden it, but they hadn't gone out of their way to tell anyone, either. Will was pretty sure Michelle had told anyone who would listen, but he and Hannibal hadn't actually gotten around to telling anyone, besides Alana. Even that had been borne more of necessity than a desire to have any sort of coming out party. Now, Will was hardly dying to shout from any rooftops, and if Chilton wanted information, he could pry it out piece by piece, until Will had made him regret the effort.

Chilton wanted to crack open Will's skull and look inside, but only one man had ever managed that, and Will had no intention of repeating the experience. Still, when Will offered him any sort of response, he flinched, as if he thought Will could slice him open and devour his innards with words alone.

It almost tempted Will to participate in therapy more. Almost.

"It would be unethical for a psychiatrist to become sexually involved with a patient."

“It would be,” Will agreed, and gave Chilton no more than that. It was certainly something he’d thought about, but Will’s insurance had no record of anything beyond the initial psych eval. Will had never paid a single dime for all those conversations they were having.

“Dr. Lecter could lose his license, if you were,” Chilton pointed out. “I’m surprised you don’t have an elaborate sexual assault story on top of all the blame you’ve assigned him.”

Chilton really was a *terrible* psychiatrist. Will was pretty sure you weren’t supposed to try and lead patients into false accusations. No matter how inept your career rivals made you feel. “That would be lying, Dr. Chilton,” Will said with a small, shadowed smile. Chilton shifted ever-so-slightly in his seat.

“And of course, you have no interest in lying. No reason to want to see Dr. Lecter suffer. Not for things he didn’t do, according to you.”

Will let his smile grow, until it was Chilton avoiding *his* eyes instead of the other way around. “I’ve only ever been interested in the truth, Dr. Chilton. Aren’t we all?”

With Abigail there to soothe her whenever the whimpers began, Michelle slept through the night without a nightmare to wake her.

Hannibal had his first in years.

He stands in the front yard of his childhood home, knee-deep in snow and shivering. Mischa’s body is sprawled across the drifts, the fresh warmth of her blood melting the snow. It was a sight Hannibal had never seen; his first glimpse of any part of Mischa’s corpse had been hunks of meat in a bowl. Yet now, the image paints itself vividly. She changes every time he forces himself to glance her way. One second, she is short-haired and bundled in blankets, as she had been in life the last time he saw her, and the next, Michelle’s long strands turn pink with blood that seeps into her school uniform. She had always been his daughter, even as their parents lived, and the knowledge claws at Hannibal’s chest.

Will comes stumbling from the doorway, wide-eyed and trembling with fever. He’s barefoot. He should not be barefoot, not in this weather. Hannibal forgets the corpse as soon as he looks away, in the fleeting nature of dreams, stepping forward to urge Will back inside. There will be a fireplace indoors, warm clothing.

Men with sharp teeth and sharper knives.

Will stumbles into Hannibal’s arms with a ragged cry. He bleeds every place Hannibal touches, bleeds and shakes until there is nothing left for his body to give.

Hannibal is in his kitchen, searing heart in a frying pan. He cooks it through, but when he sinks his teeth in, it is raw and beating.

Hannibal wakes up, or at least he believes he does. Will is in bed beside him, right where he should be. Hannibal pulls him in, presses soft kisses to the nape of his neck. Will doesn’t stir, even though that typically makes him squirm. Hannibal runs his hand down the front of Will’s

chest to feel his soft, steady breaths, and his hand travels down, down, to tangle in the intestines spilling from Will's stomach. He can't stop himself. He has a fistful of gut, and he pulls and pulls, foot by foot of soft, tender organ. Will stirs in his arms, slow as molasses, hindered by the drugs Hannibal has been plying him with for weeks. Hannibal has never drugged Will as a way to get him into his bed, but here Will is, held still but for the sobbing as Hannibal pulls every last organ out of his body. They're both crying as Hannibal's arms move on their own. From the doorway, Abigail watches, passive, and asks which part they'll eat first.

"*Please," Will begs, "Please, Hannibal." And then it is not English, but Lithuanian, and not Will's voice, but a little girl's. "Prašau, 'Anniba, prašau, Tėtis."*

Hannibal woke with the blood of his family on his lips and a twisting feeling he had not felt in years. In the aftermath of *Mischa*, terror had come to him sharp and swift, nearly every time he closed his eyes. Hannibal-the-boy had been a frightened, violent thing. Hannibal-the-man had taken that violence and transformed it into reassurance, a protection from anything that might threaten or disarm him. Guilt had no place in his mind, it was a demon he had exorcised years ago.

And yet, when he closed his eyes, he could see Will, crying in a cage, begging for his help.

It was four AM. Hannibal made coffee and rifled through his business cards.

The patients had gone home, by the time Miss Bedelia came. Michelle had tucked herself away into the private entrance with her kindle, waiting for Tėtis to finish up his paperwork and take them home. She was reading 'Ramona Quimby, Age 8' for the third time, because now that she was 8, it seemed like something she should do. Besides, Ramona books were easy to get lost in, and lately, Michelle needed to get lost.

"Hi, Miss Bedelia!" She said, dropping her kindle to wave with both hands. Miss Bedelia smiled at her, like she always did, and tucked a stray hair away from Michelle's face, but there was something wrong with the smile. She smiled with her lips, but not with her face, no dimples or teeth to be seen. Michelle knew that people smiled for reasons other than happiness, but she didn't have the right information to make sense of that. Instead, she swung her feet from her chair and watched Miss Bedelia disappear into Tėtis's office.

Tėtis's office was not a place for observing. Eavesdropping was rude, but sometimes a necessity. Violating confidentiality, on the other hand, was a Big rudeness, the kind that could get Tėtis fired. Tėtis worked all by himself, but his explanation had a lot more words, and Michelle thought 'fired' was a much easier way to say it. She didn't see the point in saying things in lots of words when you could just say them quick, except maybe if you were writing a book. Tėtis always talked like he was writing a book.

She was getting distracted. Michelle looked at the door and rubbed her hands together, palms moving in circles against each other. The sound was soft and soothing, a shush shush shush like the white-noise machine in her bedroom. She could focus again, with the sound humming softly in her ear.

The office was not for observations, because Patient Confidentiality, but Miss Bedelia was not a patient. Technically, Tėtis was a patient, but he would have told Michelle if he had a session today, and he'd said they were going home. He hadn't said Miss Bedelia was coming. Maybe he hadn't known.

Tėtis not knowing something. The thought sat uneasily in her stomach. When Tėtis didn't know things, everything got all twisty and wrong. Tėtis didn't know what Will would do, and so he'd had to make Will go away for a little, until things were better. Tėtis didn't know Miss Bedelia was coming, and so maybe that was a bad thing, and Michelle should listen close so she could rescue him if he needed it.

But she didn't have the knives here.

Michelle was just wondering if maybe her pencil sharpener could be pried apart, when Miss Bedelia's voice came through, loud and clear.

"Then maybe you deserve each other." The door to Tėtis's office swung open. Miss Bedelia walked back out, hesitating in the doorway for a long moment, like she was waiting for something. She hadn't been in long enough for a therapy session. The Wrong feeling twisted Michelle's tummy a little harder.

"This isn't the exit," Michelle told her, "But I think it's okay 'cuz all the patients are all done for the day."

Miss Bedelia stared at her. She stood for a long moment, and just looked, until Michelle squirmed. "Sorry?" She tried, because that usually worked for grownups, even if she wasn't entirely sure what she was supposed to be sorry for.

Miss Bedelia crossed the hall in two quick strides of her pretty pretty heels. She leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to Michelle's hair. She had never done that before. "I'm sorry," She whispered against Michelle's hair, "Be good." She was gone before Michelle could insist that she was (almost) always good.

Tėtis stood in the doorway, and he and Michelle looked at each other, both trying to pin down exactly what had just happened. If it made more sense to Tėtis, he wasn't telling.

"She's not coming back, is she?" It had all felt very… final. Everything felt final, lately. Michelle felt the world slipping through her fingers faster than she could grab on.

"No," Tėtis said slowly, "I don't believe she is."

"Oh." Michelle stared down at her lap, fidgeting with the hem of her uniform skirt. "Are you sad about it?"

Tėtis thought it over, tapping his fingertips against the door frame. "I believe I might be."

Michelle rolled that thought through her mind as well, thinking over the options. "Would you like a hug?"

Tėtis looked from the doorway, back to Michelle, and then nodded slowly. “If you are willing to give one.

She was still mad at him. Sometimes, she thought she might always be mad at him. But he was *Tėtis*, and she was Michelle, and no matter what happened, nothing would ever be more important than what they were together. She threw her arms open wide, and Tėtis pulled her up into a tight hug, and it was almost alright again.

Tėtis had always held them together, but things were falling apart faster than either of them could hold on. Maybe it was time for Michelle to fix things instead.

Days after Dr. Du Maurier had left, Will was still turning her words over in his mind. They thumped through him like a heartbeat, a constant patter. Despite what he knew to be true, Will had, for a moment, started to believe he really was crazy. Perhaps everyone was right, and Hannibal was exactly what he seemed, while Will was the psychopath with the steadily melting brain. For one terrifying, heart-stopping moment, Will had started to believe the lies himself.

And then, there she was, angel in heels, *I believe you*.

It had been salvation and damnation all in one, because he had known even then that she was not going to tell anyone else. Save the mind, leave the body trapped.

She had been his last visitor, and he was not due another for several days, so when the doors buzzed open, he expected Chilton, or an orderly.

He did not expect tiny footsteps, slightly out of sync, as Michelle came into view.

There was a line visitors were not meant to cross, a line that had gotten Dr. Du Maurier escorted out, but when Michelle pressed herself flush against the bars, no one came to stop her.

“Will,” She pleaded, and Will was helpless, dropping to his knees and hugging her so tight that the bars dug into his cheekbones. Michelle folded into him like she’d never left, and when she pulled back, they both had damp faces.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Will forced himself to say. She crumpled like her strings had been cut, tears spilling over. “Shi- shoot. No, honey, that’s not what I meant, I’m so glad to see you.” He tugged at her wrist until she leaned close enough to kiss her forehead through the bars. She giggled, watery but pure.

“I missed you,” She whispered.

“I missed you too, sweetheart,” Will promised, “Every single day. But Michelle, what are you doing here? How did you even get in here?” Happy as he was to see her, if Chilton’s policies allowed for 8-year-old visitors to have unsupervised visits to accused serial killers, Will was going to raise hell.

Unexpectedly, Michelle flushed. She avoided eye contact as a rule, but now she dropped her gaze all the way down to the where the floor dug into Will's knees. "I didn't go to my after-school program," She said, and tried to leave it at that.

If asked, Will would deny having any sort of paternal instincts, but whatever he *did* have reared it's head now. He frowned, cupping her chin and tilting her head up to look at him. "Michelle," He said sternly, "How did you get in here? Specifically, into this ward?"

Michelle fidgeted, eyes roaming over his face. "I took two cabs and gave a guy in the hallway two hundred dollars."

"Two hundred- Where the hell did you get two hundred dollars?"

Guilt settled in over Michelle's features, and she drew a familiar leather billfold from her pocket. Will sighed.

"You can't steal from Tėtis just to come see me," He said gently. "He trusts you to be a big girl." Will tried not to think of what his life had come to, defending Hannibal or his parenting to a child. "We both do. You're better than this."

"You don't answer when we call," She said, folding her arms with a petulant frown. "You don't talk to me."

Will winced. He'd known that was going to come back to bite him, but at the time, he'd wanted to hurt Hannibal. And protect Michelle from the hospital, which was now pointless.

"Not because I don't want to," He promised, "But they listen to everything I say here. I didn't want them to listen to you too."

Michelle glared at the ceiling. Will was fairly certain she'd missed the cameras entirely, but the effort was appreciated.

"I don't care if they listen to me," She said, pressing forward so she could drop her voice down to a tiny whisper. "You should call us."

"Michelle, Tėtis and I..." Here, Will paused. Honesty was tempting, but Michelle was so young, and she lived with Hannibal. Will had no way to rescue her, not just yet, and it was better not to drive a wedge between her and her sole support.

Michelle surprised him. She always did. "I know you're mad at him," She said, voice so low Will could barely hear it. Good. It meant Chilton would have less of her when he inevitably rewound the tapes.

"Do you?"

"I'm mad at him too."

"Why's that?" Will wasn't sure how much she understood, how much she had seen. Did she know what Hannibal was? Or was he still a superhero to her?

Michelle shrugged. “He can fix it. He fixes everything.”

“I don’t think he’s going to fix this, sweetheart.”

“He will,” She promised earnestly, “You just have to be patient.”

Will didn’t bother to remind her it was all Hannibal’s fault to begin with. It had yet to do him any good. “Tėtis can’t fix everything, Michelle.”

“He can,” She insisted, “He can, and he’s going to. You’ll see.” She dropped her voice again, so quiet that Will had to bruise his face against the bars to hear her. “We’re sorry, Will.”

“You do not have *anything* to apologize for,” Will told her, and the urgency he felt was so severe that he did not bother to whisper. He cupped her face in both hands, brushing hair out of her eyes with soft touches of his fingertips. She needed a haircut. Perhaps Hannibal had been too busy plotting to get her one. “Do you understand me, Michelle? Not a single damn thing. None of this is your fault.”

Michelle glanced away, gaze skittering across cracked ceilings and fluorescent lights. She didn’t believe him. Will could see it in her face.

“It’s going to be alright,” She promised again. The door slammed open before Will could argue.

“Michelle!” Hannibal had arrived, and while Will did not believe for a second that he hadn’t known where Michelle was from the minute she’d nabbed his credit cards, he still looked genuinely harried. Perhaps he had not expected her to take things quite so far. There were dark bags under Hannibal’s eyes, as if he hadn’t been sleeping.

Too many late-night snacks, Will thought bitterly.

“You have to go now,” He whispered to Michelle, as Hannibal hurried towards them, “Be good for me, okay? Be my brave girl.”

She clung to him when she was lifted, dragging Will to his feet, yanking his arm as far beyond the bars as it would go.

Hannibal looked well and truly caught, trapped between them. The look on his face might have been longing, on anyone else.

“We can’t stay,” Hannibal said, sounding apologetic. Sounding *honest*. “You understand why we can’t stay, right? I’m not taking her from you by choice.”

“I’m not a child,” Will snapped, harsher than he’d mean to. Michelle flinched and dropped his hand. She reached for it again, but Will pulled away, regret sinking into his stomach like a stone. “I know she’s not allowed to be here.”

He wanted her here, though. Every part of Will ached to keep Michelle right here, in his arms, which was exactly why he had to let her go. She did not belong here, in cold and damp shadows. She deserved better than Will. Better than both of them.

Tėtis had parked her on a chair outside of Dr. Chilton's office. She could hear him arguing with Dr. Chilton inside, but she knew he wasn't really mad at her. She could tell. They reflected each other too well. Michelle thought he might even be proud. She'd been very crafty, after all.

"Hey."

The man who whispered to her was not the same man she had bribed. That man was probably gonna get fired, honestly. Michelle knew how these things worked. Bribes were bad, but they were less bad if you were the one giving them.

This man was tall tall tall. Michelle tilted her head all the way back to see him smile at her.

"If you can get away on Tuesdays," He whispered, "I can turn off the cameras. It'll be our little secret, okay?"

Tuesdays. Abigail wasn't allowed to pick her up from school, too risky, and Tuesdays were not a day Tėtis could pick her up early. She could probably get out of her latchkey program, if she was careful. Tėtis would probably know, but he might look the other way, if it was for Will. She nodded slowly.

"Tuesdays," She whispered back.

"Atta girl," The man whispered, and offered her half of his snack cake.

She wasn't supposed to take things from strangers, but this man was going to let her see Will. Besides, he worked in a *hospital*. Michelle took the snack cake and ate it in two huge bites. Tėtis would smell it on her, but she'd tell him she got it from the vending machine. He might even believe her, if she was smart about it.

Chapter End Notes

People were worried Abigail was dead. Oh no. I have plans for Abigail. Just you wait.

On the subject of Miriam Lass: Canonically, Hannibal claims to have kept Miriam at the house on the cliff, despite living in Baltimore, something I referenced in Family of Choice. Miriam was apparently largely unconscious for the the two years she was missing, when she wasn't having her mind rewritten, and if I remember correctly, she said that even when her arm was removed the Ripper wasn't mistreating her? I might be misremembering that, but the implication is that she wasn't being starved or dehydrated. None of that makes any sense, because that's not how IVs or human bodies work. IVs only last a couple of hours, people who are not unconscious need to eat and drink

regularly, and people who ARE unconscious need to be regularly rotated to prevent bedsores and atrophy, which Lass did not have. It makes no sense for Hannibal to successfully keep a captive somewhere he could not visit regularly (as in, daily). I just kind of threw up my hands and said 'fuck it. you can't do half this stuff in real life anyway. This man murder-teleports around the eastern states, I can make Miriam survive indefinitely in a basement if I want to.' (The correct answer is probably 'something Strats didn't pay proper attention to,' but I much prefer 'fuck it!' Maybe Hannibal only went on vacation to the cliff house with Miriam, I don't know.)

Alana knows that Will and Hannibal were together, because Will told her. Michelle's teacher and Judo instructors know because Will was added to pick up lists, and also because Michelle really did brag to everyone about her cool new dad. Jack and Team Sassy Science do not know, because no one bothered to tell them, and Chilton doesn't know, because Hannibal and Will enjoy leaving him out of the loop out of spite.

I like the idea of Hannibal not wanting to feel any guilt but losing to his subconscious. That being said, it's good that he feels regretful, but at the same time, he feels regretful because he sees a link between Will and his sister/daughter. That is, he sees Will as someone smaller/lesser in need of protecting, and not 'a grown ass man who is Hannibal's equal.' Baby steps. (Yes, Hannibal coped with his nightmares via murder. Because Hannibal.)

It's hard to get this across through Michelle's limited perspective, but Bedelia is apologizing because she is willingly leaving Michelle to Hannibal's care. She doesn't believe Michelle is in any physical danger, but she has her suspicions about how Hannibal plans to raise Michelle (These suspicions are entirely correct, but we'll get to that).

I wavered on whether or not Michelle should visit Will. On the one hand, people asked for it and it was a scene I knew I'd wanted from the beginning. And on the other hand, I'm not entirely sure '8-year-old girl sneaking off her private school campus to traverse Baltimore on her own' is entirely realistic. In the end, I did what I do best: I said 'fuck it!'

Thanks for joining me in my rambles, and if you made it this far, just one final question. I asked this over on my tumblr, but only one person responded:

As you all know, updates are a little slow right now. I alternate chapters of Choices with chapters of The Rules, I had a September prompt I had to get through (which is now posted), and I have a mystery project for October. That being said, I also know that the angst of these last few chapters has really gotten to people. So I'm putting it to a vote: Do we continue with this until we get through to the very last chapter, or do we take a minor detour down memory lane, and I'll post one or two short bits about when Michelle came to live with Hannibal and they were happy together? Before getting back to prison!Will. (If I post those bits, which will eventually happen regardless, they will be part of the Choices series but a separate story, so you will want to be subscribed to either the series or all my fics, not just ATWC.)

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Guys. Guys. I need you to trust me, okay?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first time Michelle went to visit Will, she'd simply told the teacher in charge of the after school program that she was going to the bathroom, and then walked right off campus. That was probably not going to work a second time, so she had to get a bit more creative.

On Sunday, she did some research into her school's website. After Abigail had tucked her in and gone to talk with Tėtis, Michelle had pulled out a flashlight and spent an hour carefully copying Tėtis's signature from of one of his old sketchbooks until she had it right. On Monday, she handed her teacher a carefully filled out permission slip that would allow her to take the bus home from school. On Tuesday, Michelle rode the bus to the second stop, slipped off in a group of fifth graders, and hired a cab with money she'd pulled from one of the emergency stashes Tėtis kept around the house. She'd been careful to only take a little, and not to touch any of the credit cards or passports. It could be dangerous if she misplaced those.

It took two cabs to get to the hospital, and then she'd gotten stuck. Dr. Chilton knew who she was, and nobody else was going to let an elementary school student go wandering through the halls. She'd gotten lucky last time, but they'd be wary of her now.

In the end, Michelle crept in through a back door someone had propped open for a smoke break, and then made her way through the halls towards Will until the friendly orderly from before found her. It didn't take long.

"I was watching for you," He said when he pulled her into the right hallway, "You're a lucky little thing. You almost ran straight into Dr. Chilton. He likes to antagonize his newest pet at around this time."

"This is a silly place to keep a pet." Michelle said. She clung tight to the man's hand as he led her down the halls. They all looked the same, and she didn't want to get lost.

The man laughed at her. He was always smiling, she'd noticed, small and secret, like he knew something. He thought she was funny, but she didn't know why. Grown-ups were a frustrating mess of emotions, and they never liked to tell kids what they were thinking. The orderly was nice, but he was still a grown up.

"I can loop twenty minutes of footage," He explained when they finally arrived, "And then we need to sneak you back out. How good are you at climbing through windows?"

Michelle looked up up up at the tall orderly, then down down down at her tiny frame and the Bad Foot. She bit her lip.

“Yeah, good point,” The orderly said.

“I didn’t… I didn’t say anything?”

The man patted her on the head and then nudged her towards the big metal door with a hand on her back. “Twenty minutes,” He reminded her, “Our little secret.” Michelle nodded, then turned back, handing him the cookie she’d saved from her lunch. He took a big huge bite of it, like a little kid, and grinned at her. Then he pushed her through the door, and it was just her and Will.

There were other big cages in this part of the hospital, but they’d been empty before and they were empty now. Michelle knew people thought Will was scary, but this was a bit silly.

“No,” Will said when he saw her, shaking his head.

“I didn’t *say* anything,” Michelle said for the second time in five minutes, a hint of a whine creeping in despite her very best efforts to be grown up.

“No, as in, ‘not a chance’, as in, ‘turn around and go home, right now.’ God, how do you keep getting *in* here?”

“I think they’re more worried about people getting out?” Michelle offered, even though she suspected Will had not really wanted an answer. Grown ups asked questions like that all the time, and they always seemed upset with her when she answered them.

Will laughed like she’d said something funny, then got to his knees and reached for her. “Come here, then. You made it this far. Not like we can get into any *more* trouble.”

This was not true. Michelle had read up on prison. Will could get in lots and *lots* more trouble.

She didn’t say any of the things she’d read, though, because Will’s arms were tight and warm around her, and then she was too busy crying to say anything at all.

It had been a lot, last time. Too much for her to really process, and then Tėtis had shown up and it had all crashed and burned really quickly, before Michelle could really feel much of anything. Now, she had *twenty whole minutes*, and she wanted to spend all of them right here, being hugged by Will.

He didn’t smell right. Will was supposed to smell like… like… Well, she didn’t really know what it was. Tėtis said Will smelled like very bad aftershave, iron, ink, and dog. He said that it was actually not a bad smell, except for the aftershave. Michelle couldn’t have told you what scent came from what thing, it was all one big Will-smell. Sometimes she could make out traces, little bits of heat or sweat. There was a little bit of the sweat, now, but not much. Mostly, Will smelled like the hospital, all cold and wrong. She wanted the Will-smell. She

wanted to crawl into bed between Will and Tètis and never come back out again, pretend this had all been one big bad dream.

Michelle cried and cried and cried. Will tried to rock her like he did when he could hold her properly, but the bars were in the way. Instead, he made soft hushing noises and pet her hair, until her sobs went shaky, and then finally tapered off entirely.

“Me too, sweetheart,” Will said once she was quiet, “Me too.” And Michelle still hadn’t *said* anything, but she thought she understood what he meant, anyway.

Hannibal waited for Michelle around the block from the hospital, within sight of the bus stop. Her shoulders hunched when she saw the Bentley, and she shrank in on herself with every step, red-eyed and damp-faced. Hannibal took pity on her and carried her the last few feet, scooping her up with a tight hug and a kiss to the top of her head.

“This can’t happen again,” He said gently as he buckled her into her booster seat. She was old enough now to work the buckle herself, but lately he found he could not bear to part from her for long.

“I know,” She said once he’d settled himself back into the car. She looked out the window with distant, hollow eyes, shutting down. She’d been so vibrant before all of this. Hannibal…

Hannibal *regretted.*

It was not an emotion he was used to. It was not something he’d ever bothered with before. Still, it lingered in his throat, tight and thick like tar. He pulled over on a side street, just a few minutes from where they’d set off, and turned in his seat to look at her.

Michelle’s eyes missed him by scant centimeters on a good day. Today, the distance was miles. He reached out for her hand, and she let him take it, but did not clutch back.

“I’m going to fix this,” He promised. Michelle’s eyes glazed over.

“You said.”

“And I meant it. I don’t keep you from him to hurt you, Michelle.”

“People are going to talk,” She said, ducking her head, “So I can’t go back.”

“Smart girl,” Hannibal praised. She didn’t smile like she usually did. Instead, her eyes finally locked on his, with a great deal of effort and no small amount of calculation. Hannibal took advantage of the effort to make his promise again. “I’m going to fix this. I’m going to bring him home.”

Michelle was a well of questions, as was any other child, but now she held only one. “Are you sorry?” She whispered, big brown eyes flicking away and then forced right back to his, a herculean effort for her, and one that left Hannibal breathless. It was not the question he’d expected.

“Yes,” He finally said, and his voice spilled from him in a cracked and ragged breath. The surprise on her face mimicked his own. “Yes, Michelle, I’m sorry.”

Her eyes welled up with tears. She flipped her hand in his to clutch at his fingers, grip tight. “Okay,” She mumbled, “Then I won’t go back. Because he’s coming home.”

“As soon as I can manage it.” Hannibal promised, and for the first time in weeks, his daughter looked like she trusted him again.

Michelle wasn’t allowed to go to the trial. Not for the first day, anyway.

“They’re going to show the evidence,” Tėtis explained, and he’d come all the way down to the floor to do it, which meant he was taking her seriously, at least. He understood why she was upset. He cupped her face in his hands, big and warm and finally feeling safe again. “It will be brutal. They will not allow a child in the room.”

“You’ll show me, though? Later?”

Tėtis shook his head. “You already know what they believe happened to Abigail. It is important that we not muddle that with too much information just yet.” He paused, then, and his hands tightened before dropping to settle on her shoulders. “They want to subpoena you. Do you know what that means?”

Michelle shook her head.

“It means that the lawyers would like you to come and tell the court what you remember about the night Abigail disappeared.”

Michelle looked over Tėtis’s shoulder, where Abigail was standing in the doorway. “I told them that, already,” She said, voice going high and strained. “We went to the police station, I talked to Dr. Bloom, I said I didn’t see anything!”

“The prosecution will want to ask you more questions. They will try and get you to describe things you may have heard, things that might not have come up in your testimony.”

“But I *did this* already!”

“And you can do it again,” Abigail piped up, kneeling down next to Tėtis, “You know the story. You know what you’re supposed to say. We’ll practice today, you and me. Okay?”

“But what if I get it wrong?” Michelle jerked back, away from Tėtis’s hands, and the sandpaper of his skin. Her hands started to flap, shake shake shake. She paced, back and forth, left foot right foot left foot right foot, “What if I get it wrong and then Will can’t come home and-” She drew in a breath, let it out, but when she went to draw in the next it wouldn’t come. The air rattled in her throat and wouldn’t fill her lungs. She shook and shook and shook, and when Abigail reached for her she smacked her hands away. “Don’t touch me! I’m going to get it wrong, I’m going to mess up and Will won’t come home and it’ll be all my fault!” Flap flap flap her skin was crawling left foot right foot left foot right foot Michelle tap

tap tapped the rhythm of her steps against the skin of her cheek until she could feel the residue of her own touch lingering like a bruise.

The blanket came over her shoulders without warning. Tėtis pinned her with the weighted fabric, wrapping her up in the soft cocoon and yanking her back against his chest. He rocked her and spoke her sonnets, soft Italian she barely understood but folded under anyway. Always the same, rhythmic and soothing, she could have recited them even without the meanings. He was in her ears and under her skin, all around her.

“They’ll take me away,” Michelle mumbled, “You said. I’ll get it wrong and they’ll take me away.”

Tėtis’s grip tightened, warm pressure that kept her from floating away down the stream.

“No one will *ever* take you from me,” He promised, and she believed him. She closed her eyes and let him rock her until the exhaustion forced her under, into sleep.

Hannibal tucked Michelle into her bed, her face red from crying and bruising where she’d been too rough with herself. He placed his kiss there, right over the shadow, and left the night lights on even though the morning sun streamed through the windows.

“She’s right,” Abigail whispered when they were alone. “She might get it wrong. She’s so young.”

“She’s done it before,” Hannibal replied, “And her age will work to her advantage. She’s young, and looks younger. They will be willing to dismiss minor errors as confusion. Nobody will be expecting a little girl to get everything right. Nobody will be expecting her to remember much at all.”

“Then why bother asking?”

“It’s a cheap tactic. The record of her testimony would be evidence enough. The prosecution is hoping she’ll get upset and provoke an emotional response in the jury.”

“She’ll get upset, alright,” Abigail complained, “Did you really tell her they would take her away?”

“At the time, I had to.”

Abigail looked mistrustful. Hannibal could hardly blame her.

“She was five years old and had just murdered both her parents. I needed her to concentrate on getting the story right.”

Abigail froze, certain he must be lying. He could see the doubt in her face. But Hannibal had so far been honest with her, and he could see the weight of that knowledge settling uneasily on her face. “S-Self-defense?” She asked, hopeful. Hannibal was trying to ease her away

from fear and into something fierce, but she still grew so cautious when Michelle was involved.

“Of a sort. Certainly, had they lived, they would have done worse to her.”

“They don’t lock up kindergartners. They’re not old enough to know any better.”

“Of course not. But they would have looked. They would have studied. They may have sent her to special homes and psychiatric wards.” This was, perhaps, an understatement. Left to fend for herself, and honest until told not to be, Hannibal knew exactly what sort of attention Michelle would have provoked. She would have aroused the same professional curiosity that had Fredrick Chilton preening over Will’s incarceration.

“So you terrified her to get what you wanted.”

No one had ever shamed Hannibal before, not successfully, but Abigail had managed to dig into a place where he was sensitive. “I didn’t know her then,” He allowed, “She was just a child I’d met ten minutes before. I would make different decisions now.”

Abigail eyed him critically, and then sighed. “No you wouldn’t,” She said, “Because then you wouldn’t have Michelle.”

Hannibal couldn’t bring Michelle to the trial, but he could bring her just about everywhere else. As far as anyone in his life knew, he was still having trouble finding her a regular sitter, something he had no plan to waste money on when Abigail was perfectly willing. As no one else knew Abigail was alive, it gave him the excuse he needed to let Michelle tag along wherever he went. She sat in a little folding chair in the hallway when he was in the lab, and when they pulled him out to a crime scene late at night, she tilted precariously to the side in her booster seat, covered in a blanket and supposedly sleeping, though the cracked window he’d left closed shed some doubt on that. Later, he sat at the table with her and Abigail and let them ask questions over dinner.

“Someone wants to help Will,” Abigail said thoughtfully.

“That’s good,” Michelle chimed in, “Isn’t it?”

“Perhaps,” Hannibal allowed, “Can you think of reasons it might not be?”

Abigail looked like she’d already thought of several, but Hannibal waited patiently for Michelle to catch up.

“They could do it wrong?” Michelle finally tried, “You said Will was really good at what he did. Abigail said it was almost like magic.”

Hannibal shot Abigail a disapproving look. She utterly failed to look chastened, which was theoretically a good thing, although it didn’t bode well for Hannibal’s control over his household.

“Will is an exceptionally talented specialist,” Hannibal explained.

“So he would know if they did it wrong. And so would other people if they were really good at their job. Like Miss Beverly.” Michelle nodded to herself and then thought some more. “Also, maybe they’ll get real mad if it doesn’t work.”

“And an angry person who’s willing to commit murder is a wild card,” Abigail added, when Michelle seemed to have reached her limit, “Especially if they find out Will didn’t do what they think he did. They might feel betrayed.”

“Would they hurt Will?” Michelle asked in a small voice. Hannibal shook his head.

“Will can defend himself. And he has us, doesn’t he?”

Abigail did not look particularly reassured, but Michelle brightened and nodded. “’sides-” At Hannibal’s expectant look, she hastily corrected herself- “*Be*sides, if they want to help Will, they probably like him.”

“A reasonable assumption to make. You’ve both done very well.”

Abigail, despite her skepticism, looked just as pleased as Michelle. He rewarded the both of them with raspberry tortes.

Hannibal grew antlers and fangs before Will’s very eyes. Black as pitch and sharp edged, he swore his honesty in lies Will could taste. But when he looked at Will, for once, Will could see something genuine there. Something longing.

It’s no fun being so clever if I’m not there to appreciate it, is it?

“Please describe your relationship with Will Graham.”

Intimate. Intense. Unbalanced. Hannibal said none of those things. He wove his answer like spider’s silk. Professional. Honesty without exposure.

“I was never officially his psychiatrist.”

“No, that would have been inappropriate, considering your affair.”

They’d known it would come up. Alana had looked surprisingly doe-eyed and meek. If she’d been harboring a crush, still, Will had thought it would have died off after the murder charges.

Do you have any supporters who don’t *want to sleep with you?* His lawyer had asked. Apparently, Will did not, and so Hannibal had been called forth, as the more composed of the two. Lesser of two evils, the only situation where that could possibly be true. They’d hoped that Hannibal’s composure, his professionalism, would go a long way. He was less likely to burst into tears, certainly.

Or so Will had thought. It all went downhill from there. It had been a stupid idea anyway. Will had latched on to that little bit of hope, even though he'd known, he'd *known* that there was no way this would work. Hannibal didn't use guns. He worked with his *hands*. He did everything with a personal touch, right down to the way he twisted Will's life to suit his needs.

But Will had *hoped*. His lawyer had latched on to any chance to 'win.' And Will had so much hope that it twisted into him and collapsed his lungs until each breath was a painful gasp.

And Hannibal.

Hannibal.

"All previous testimony on the matter will be stricken from the record."

Hannibal, on his way past Will, had *sorrow* in his eyes.

Will closed his eyes and waded into the quiet of the stream.

Hannibal had known it wouldn't work. Will should have known as well, had he been thinking more clearly. Hannibal chose to accept some of the blame for that; Desperation did funny things even to brilliant people.

Still, he felt a bit of resentment towards Will's lawyer for going forward with the farce of a defense. Since punishing the lawyer was out of the question, Hannibal channeled some of that rage into the judge.

It was a boring kill. There was no challenge to gunfire, no effort. One moment the judge was alive, the next he was not. It colored the tableau. Sculpting his art would never cease to be entertaining, but there was something lacking when there was no one around to see it through their suffering.

Will would know, though. He would look and he would know what Hannibal had done for him, one day. The judge's death would not tip the scales in Hannibal's favor, but it would be one step towards the absolution Hannibal sought.

Will's admirer would see it, as well. He'd look at the judge's corpse and know his assumptions had been wrong. Hannibal doubted it would change anything; Will's darkness hovered, unseen, just at the edges of his being. It lingered in his eyes and grew with Will's frustration. No, Hannibal very much doubted the admirer would be able to look away. But hopefully, he would see the warning for what it was.

He's already spoken for.

"I didn't tell you that I met your kid," Beverly told Will, laying out photos. Will frowned.

“I don’t have children.”

“Really? Somebody should probably tell Michelle that. I don’t think she knows.”

Will shook his head and tried not to let loose the smile that tugged at his mouth. “Michelle loves everyone.”

“Yeah, well, she doesn’t talk about everyone.”

“She talks about me?” Will couldn’t help the curiosity, the hunger. He knew she missed him, of course, but he ate up scraps of her life like a stray dog, feasting on crumbs like they were four-course meals.

“Every single time I see her.”

Will hesitated, brow furrowed. “How often do you-” It clicked, all at once, and he groaned. “He’s been bringing her to *crime scenes*?”

“And the lab. Don’t worry, he doesn’t take her past the doorway. And it was just the one crime scene. Two if you count the one she was asleep for.”

Will absolutely counted that one. Beverly caught his dirty look.

“She didn’t *see* anything,” She told him softly, “I took her to play in an ambulance. She had a blast.”

What Michelle saw and what she was told were two different things, and Will no longer trusted Hannibal’s judgment. Still, none of that was Beverly’s fault. Will changed the subject.

“You didn’t bring her up before. You’d already seen her the last time you visited.”

“I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear what you had to say about her.”

“And now?”

Beverly frowned down at the photos, then glanced up at Will. “Last time Hannibal brought Michelle to the lab, she asked if I ever came to visit you. She said she thought you might be lonely. Whatever else I believe, I believe that she loves you. And I don’t think she’d do that without good reason. She’s a shy kid. She won’t even look at Zeller, he gets so offended.”

For a moment, Will forgot the handcuffs and reached out for her hand. They pulled him up short, and he awkwardly grabbed for one of the photos instead. Beverly didn’t look as though she believed the deception, but she was nice enough not to point it out.

“I wanted her to be mine,” He whispered, a moment of vulnerability. Beverly, at least, was unlikely to use that vulnerability to slice Will’s skull open. Instead, she looked pained.

“I think she still is,” She said, and it was the nicest thing anyone had said to Will since he’d been arrested. Beverly cleared her throat. “Will, the case. You were right. The killer was in the mural.”

Will looked down at the photos and let himself see.

Will was plotting something. Hannibal was both irritated and pleased. He had to miss out on his appointment with Will, and he had to listen to Fredrick Chilton try and play mind games he was nowhere near smart enough to pull off, but Hannibal could hardly be upset with Will for any step towards his becoming. Even one so sharply obvious.

“Fredrick Chilton has become suspicious of me,” He mused to Abigail later. Both of his girls were ‘helping’ in the kitchen, Michelle by sitting on a stool at the island and mixing dessert batter with a vigor that left more batter on her than in the bowl, and Abigail by chopping vegetables into uneven and misshapen lumps. Hannibal corrected neither of them. It was rare to have a day where everyone seemed content, and he was hesitant to be the one to ruin it.

Not hesitant enough to keep Abigail in the dark, however. There was no point to teaching her anything at all if he kept silent where it mattered. Abigail’s fingers slipped on the knife; the next pepper slice was crushed beneath the flat of the blade.

“There’s no need to worry.” In retrospect, he perhaps should have led with that. But in a perfect world, Abigail would learn to properly control her emotional responses, and Hannibal was doing his best to create a perfect world.

“Suspicious of what, exactly?”

“He believes my treatment of Will may have tended towards the unorthodox.”

“And did it?”

Hannibal smiled down at her, a hint of teeth, a sharp vein of pride. Abigail didn’t roll her eyes, but he could see the desire written across her face. Baby steps. A desire for rudeness was not quite so distasteful as rudeness itself. “Any treatment proposed for Will was done with Will’s consent and for his own good.”

“But Will probably wasn’t in a state to be giving any sort of informed or *remembered* consent.” It was not an accusation, merely a statement of fact. Abigail returned to her vegetables. “And Dr. Chilton would use that against you.”

“He would certainly try,” Hannibal agreed, “However, he’s tended towards the unorthodox himself. I believe right now he’s attempting to set himself up a very exclusive club.”

“He’s jealous,” Abigail summed up, “Professionally speaking, but probably personally too. People like you. They don’t like him.”

Hannibal let his smile widen a bit, amused. “No, they do not.”

“And Will went to therapy with you. Of a sort. Mostly willingly, depending on how informed you like your consent to be. Freddie Lounds told me any psychiatrist worth their salt would have wet themselves at the chance.”

“I imagine she was even cruder about it than you have just been,” Hannibal said with a raised eyebrow. Abigail flushed slightly and murmured an apology.

“It’s true though,” She continued, “You had a chance he could only dream of, and he’s jealous.”

“Yes, I think that’s a reasonable summation. He has that chance now, though. He has taken on exclusive care of Will. I believe Will has made him promises.”

Abigail’s knife slipped again, but she straightened out and continued to chop. “Will won’t keep those promises, even if he intends to at first. He’s private. Even with us. I think he wanted to open up to us, he was learning to, but he was still private.”

“And so we have nothing to fear from Fredrick Chilton. He has no end goal, no clear plan, no control over the playing pieces.”

“Don’t tell Will you called him that.”

“Never,” Hannibal promised.

Abigail scraped the vegetables into a bowl and turned to wash her knife. “Whatever may come,” She said, firm and certain, “We’ll handle it together.”

“That’s my girl.”

The smile she gave him was true, earnest and eager. Hannibal committed it to her room in his memory palace, and showed her how to season the vegetables.

It came to him in what passed for therapy with Chilton. But then, Will was getting used to the word ‘therapy’ being applied to all sorts of things.

It comes in flashes, the sharp pain of antlers prickling through his skin.

The slow slide of a needle into his arms, the chill of the injection.

The clock the clock was it always so twisted?

Hannibal’s hands in his hair, smoothing back sweat damp curls.

Soft kisses to his brow.

You did so well, Will, so well.

Tick tock tick tock ask your questions doc.

Will was *enraged,* fire and hatred and a new stripe of cruelty he’d never possessed before. Hannibal had taken his skull apart to dip his hands inside. Will wanted to do the same with his chest, wanted to take Hannibal’s most vital pieces in his hands and squeeze tight.

Beverly was the sole source of light in his life right now. He regretted that they hadn't been closer before. Maybe she would have had a little more faith in him.

"Stay away from Hannibal Lecter," He warned her, but he could see the stubborn set of her shoulders.

"Somehow, Will, I don't think he's going to start stabbing me while I'm sharing vending machine soda with his 8-year-old."

Will thought about Michelle, about the way her hands had trembled when she held the gun, but never once had she seemed surprised or confused. Or scared, at least of Hannibal. Will suspected there was a lot Hannibal would do in front of Michelle. He no longer believed her birth father tripped and fell down the stairs.

"Don't use her as your shield," He hissed, "He's had three years to train her. She's a little girl. She's going to trust her father. Do what he tells her. If he tells her to leave the room so the two of you can chat, if he tells her later that you had to leave suddenly, too quick to say goodbye…?"

He trailed off, purposeful. Beverly looked concerned, but also incensed. The desire to disbelieve mingling with the knowledge that he was right. Michelle was no guarantee, not with a killer as vicious as the Ripper.

Beverly changed the subject. "The Ripper keeps surgical trophies. If Hannibal's the ripper, what's he doing with the trophies?"

This, Will knew. He'd kept it to himself, kept it locked deep inside, tried not to think about it. Had vomited thinking about it anyway. "He's. He's eating them."

Beverly frowned. "That's a lot of meat for just one man."

"He's not just one man. He has dinner parties to host." Will hesitated, swallowed around a thick wave of disgust, "A family to provide for..."

The nausea rolled over Beverly in a palpable wave. Will could see the exact moment she had to bite back her feelings, struggling to roll the professional mask back into place. "She's a *baby*."

"All the more reason to feed her *well*." Will drawled, and watched Beverly's stoicism shatter. She believed him. She didn't know it, not yet. She still thought herself impartial. But she liked Michelle, was protective of children by nature. She believed him.

She *believed* him.

In the end, it was sheer luck that let events unfold the way they did.

Michelle liked getting to tag along with Tėtis, she really did, but she wasn't supposed to eavesdrop on patients. And if, on occasion, she did so anyway, they never actually said

anything interesting. And so she maybe, possibly, had just the tiniest bit of a fit. More of a pout, really, hardly anything actually *naughty*, and anyway, as far as Michelle was concerned, Tėtis owed her big time for all the stuff with Will (She may have said that. Out loud. To his face. Tėtis hadn't looked all that amused, but Abigail had laughed, so maybe it was funny).

So it was coincidence, and not any real skill or effort, that meant Michelle was at home with Abigail when Tėtis called and said he would be home let after accompanying Miss Bella to the hospital, and it was coincidence that they were in the kitchen, and not upstairs, when someone began to fiddle with the lock on the front door.

They didn't have a plan for this. Abigail and Tėtis had plans for if something went wrong, if Abigail was discovered or someone suspected Tėtis. They had secret stashes all over the house and in the secret house on the cliff. They did not have a plan for someone *breaking into the house*.

But Abigail was smart, and Michelle had learned from Tėtis. "The basement!" Michelle whispered, while Abigail hurried to hide their dinner in the trash can. Michelle quickly wiped crumbs and any other signs of their presence away from the table, and locked the pantry door behind them when they disappeared into it.

The basement was mostly soundproofed, but not entirely. Michelle could hear cautious footsteps as Abigail carefully eased the trap door shut. The door shut them out, but as Abigail carried her down the stairs, Michelle swore she could still hear them in the *thump thump thump* of her own heart.

The basement was not a comfortable place. Michelle had never been further than the trap door, stuck at the top of the steps calling down for Tėtis. Knowing, in her heart, what was in the basement, but scared to see it for herself. Scared and curious and eager and unwanting.

Now, there was no time to take it in. It was dark, too dark. Abigail crouched against a wall and held Michelle in her lap, one hand pressed over Michelle's mouth. It didn't matter; Michelle couldn't have made a sound.

Quiet. Quiet. Quiet. Stillness. Nothing but the light of Abigail's phone as she sent a frantic text to Tėtis, the quick gasps of Abigail's scared breaths.

And then. The smooth slide of the trap door. A beam of light. Abigail went stiff behind her and Michelle's heart went *thump thump thump*.

The light slid over plastic and chains. A platform. Shelves. *Thump thump thump.* And then the two of them, too-bright in Michelle's eyes. She covered her face with a hand until the beam went away and the lights clicked on.

Miss Beverly. For a moment, relief. Michelle trusted Miss Beverly. Liked her. And then, reality: Where they were. What Miss Beverly must know. What Michelle and Abigail would have to do. *Thump thump thump*.

"Oh my god," Miss Beverly whispered. And then she turned, and Michelle's eyes adjusted to the light, and Michelle realized who else was in the basement.

Tėtis. Tėtis with a twisted up frown that Michelle couldn’t read. Safety and security and reassurance and *fear.* They were safe, with him here. Miss Beverly was not.

The lights went out. The gun went off. Michelle began to scream.

Thump. Thump.

Thump.

Chapter End Notes

JUST TRUST ME. PLEASE. TRUST ME.

So this chapter was a bit of a wait, I know. If you follow me on tumblr, you already know this, but I'm in a bit of a rough spot right now, thanks to work and exhaustion, and this chapter fought me. Some days I wrote maybe two hundred words. Part of the problem is that this series works because we explore the things that change when you introduce Michelle to the situation. Michelle is 8 years old. Her presence would not be heavily felt in a serial murder trial. Add that to Will's incarceration meaning he struggles to interact with other characters, and when he does, they're usually still talking about the murder... It was a real struggle to write this chapter without either repeating the show word for word (which I hate), or skimming over stuff so fast that people who hadn't watched the episodes recently would be lost. It's why this is the first chapter to cover two episodes instead of just one. (Family of Choice had 12 chapters to the show's 13 episodes, but that was more Will forcing Hannibal's hand sooner, as opposed to combining two episodes into one chapter). There was a lot of 'this is not at all fun or interesting to write, but I have to get through it in order to get to the good stuff.'

That being said, we have done it! We have made it through the boring stuff! Will is still in prison, but things are finally going to start happening again. Things that Michelle can be present for, or things that are changed due to the butterfly effect of her existence and the Hannigram relationship. So the next chapter should be easier.

It seems like Michelle basically lucks her way into the BSHCI, but actually Matthew was watching for her and is in fact the one who left the door open. You just don't get to know that through Michelle's limited perspective. (He did not make her leave through the window. He let her go out the same door she came in, like a normal human being.) There wasn't anything super interesting in her conversation with Will, although she did still refuse to tell him how she'd gotten in. Mostly, there was hugging and crying.

I know everyone really hates Hannibal right now, and I know he does not connect emotionally with Michelle or Abigail in the same exact way a normal person would, but he definitely loves and cherishes Michelle and is upset that she is upset. Michelle definitely pokes at that Mischa-trauma-nerve he definitely has, and he doesn't like feeling like he failed her. She is probably the only human being who could draw that

feeling from him, and it's largely thanks to her physical similarities to Mischa (Will is getting there, though, and will soon share that same space in Hannibal's limited emotional range). I try really hard to not make Michelle the magic Mary-Sue who 'changes' Hannibal too much, but I think it's not too out of character for him to be attached to her? Parenting does weird things to people. IDK I'm still not happy with the car scene.

Originally, they *did* subpoena Michelle, and there was going to be a scene where she testified in court. It did not go well, because she wanted to tell the lawyer to shut up, and I couldn't find enough information on whether or not 8 year olds can be held in contempt of court. So we neatly side-step that with the judge's death.

Hannibal is changing Abigail, but she may be changing him, too. She's certainly not always approving of his parenting choices, and Hannibal will likely find it difficult to argue with the Free Child Care.

I really like scenes where Hannibal and his girls talk about murder like it's normal dinner conversation.

Honestly it didn't make much sense to allow Hannibal to testify on Will's behalf, but Will ran out of psychiatrist friends, and it wasn't like Hannibal did any worse this time around than he did in canon. I feel like Hannibal was more of a 'lesser of two evils' thing because Will's lawyer didn't have any other options.

So. This last scene. This was the easiest scene to write, by far. It was a scene I have been waiting to write. And honestly? My heart was pounding too. Just. Bear with me, guys.

Next on my update list is The Rules, followed by a small Spacedogs one-shot, and then the October Mystery Project I keep talking about on Tumblr. We will be back to Choices in Early November. I have no idea what the holidays will do to my update schedule.

Thanks for always sticking with me, guys. Even though I never shut the fuck up. <3

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I TOLD YOU ALL TO TRUST ME, AND YOU *DIDN'T.*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thump. Thump.

Thump.

When the lights went on, there was a thin trickle of blood across Miss Beverly's forehead, where Tėtis must have smacked her head against the floor. She was still breathing, though.

Tėtis went straight for a cabinet against one of the walls. "Abigail, I will need your assistance."

For a moment, neither girl moved. Abigail clutched Michelle to her chest, so tight it was nearly painful. Tėtis looked over his shoulder with a frown. "She will not remain unconscious forever," He said, and that was enough to get Abigail moving. She left Michelle against the wall, hurrying to gather equipment from the walls.

Michelle peered at Miss Beverly. She crept over, staring at the bruise that was slowly darkening Miss Beverly's forehead.

Miss Beverly was still, except for her breathing. Soon, she would be even more still, frozen forever, unmoving.

When her parents died, Michelle had been too angry to really see. When Nina died, she had been too scared.

Now, she was calm, or at least trying to be. There was no danger, not with Tėtis around, and she had known from the moment they were discovered that Miss Beverly could not be allowed to leave. Michelle matched her breathing to the slow rise and fall of Miss Beverly's chest, and wondered what it looked like when life slowly left someone. She had a thousand curiosities. What did the human heart look like when it was still beating? What would it feel like, if she touched it?

Reaching out, Michelle brushed a lock of hair from Miss Beverly's face. For a moment, she knew she could do it, if Tėtis let her. She wanted to open someone up and see what made them tick.

But Miss Beverly…

Miss Beverly was nice to her, and more importantly, she was nice to Will. She believed in Will. She was the best person, outside of Michelle's family.

"No."

The word slipped from Michelle's lips before she realized what she'd decided. Tėtis hesitated, and then knelt beside Michelle, setting a heavy bag down on the ground with a *thump*.

"No?" He asked, calm and patient. Not like Abigail, who stood before them wringing her hands.

"No," Michelle confirmed, "Not this one. Not Miss Beverly."

Tėtis gave her a smile, a confusing, unknown smile. "A penny for your thoughts?"

Michelle held out her hand expectantly. Tėtis chuckled and drew a five-dollar bill from his pocket. "I'm afraid I'm fresh out of pennies," he explained. Michelle clutched the bill to her chest and thought it over carefully.

"She looked out for Will." She finally said, "She was good to us. Good to our family. We should repay that kindness."

"An eye for an eye," Tėtis mused, which was *gross*.

"I don't want her eyes," Michelle insisted, frowning when Abigail began to giggle, hands finally stilling, "You can't even make stuff with eyes. We don't need them."

"We're not going to take her eyes," Abigail promised, dropping down on Michelle's other side. "Even if… Even if we kill her."

Michelle nodded, tapping her fingers against the ground in one-two-three patterns. "I don't think we should kill her," She told Tėtis, "We didn't kill the lady in the basement. At the secret house."

Technically, no one had ever outright told her there was a lady in the basement, but Tėtis and Abigail talked about her a lot, and Michelle had put the facts together a long time ago. And she'd gotten very good at listening. Even so, Abigail went very still, and Tėtis gave her a funny smile.

"You know Miss Beverly cannot leave. Just like the lady in the basement."

"I understand."

"You would be condemning her to a life without consciousness. I've worked with our other guest to help her forget, but it has been a long process. I can't say how long it would take me to change Miss Beverly's mind, or if it can even be done on someone who knows us so well. Or" Tėtis added, bringing Michelle's hands to his face so her gaze would be guided, so she knew he was saying something important, "I could end her life peacefully. She would know no pain.

Michelle hesitated, chewing on her lower lip. Abigail was giving her a funny look, one that Michelle had no matching face cards for.

“The choice is yours,” Tėtis said softly, squeezing both of Michelle’s hands in his big ones, “I will do whatever you ask of me. You needn’t stay, regardless.”

Michelle looked from Tėtis’s big big hands to Miss Beverly. Tėtis’s hands were rough from his work, but steady. Death did not bother him. And Michelle… She *wanted.* She wanted to sate her thousands of curiosities. She wanted to feel what it was like to control something so utterly.

But not tonight.

“I would like to keep her,” She decided, nodding once, “Even if we can’t change her mind.”

“Then that is what we’ll do.”

Abigail relaxed, then, her whole body going all loose. She rubbed at her eyes and sighed. “I guess you’ll need the IV stand, then?” She asked, getting to her feet when Tėtis nodded.

“Can I help?” Michelle asked, once Abigail was far enough away that Michelle didn’t have to wonder about all her funny looks. Tėtis gave her one instead, a small smile that she didn’t quite understand, but thought might be happy. Smiles were usually happy, weren’t they?”

“You may watch,” Tėtis said.

And so, she did.

Beverly Katz disappeared on a Friday. Her disappearance was not immediately noted; she lived alone, and her immediate family were all used to long delays before their calls were returned. In the end, it was Jimmy Price and Brian Zeller who first became suspicious, when she failed to show up at the lab on Monday.

Beverly did not return on Tuesday, or Wednesday. Her home, her car, her office. All were exactly as they should have been. Undisturbed. Unchanged. A package of chicken had been left to defrost on Friday morning. By the time Jimmy ad Brian let themselves into her apartment, it had gone bad, drawing in flies in thick black clumps.

When a week passed, desperation set in.

There was a file, because there had to be, but it was woefully underdeveloped. Will stared Jack down, flipping through the pages half-heartedly. “When I wrote my monograph on time of death by insect activity,” He said slowly, “I generally only looked at things that hadn’t already been butchered and processed.”

“I’m not asking you to investigate the chicken,” Jack said irritably. Will took another glance at the pictures.

“Whose apartment is it?” He asked, but even as the words left his lips, he’d turned to another angle shot of the kitchen, a glance at a refrigerator covered in family photos. Beverly was the oldest, the first in a line of many children, but the teenage girl right above the ice dispenser was her spitting image. “Whose apartment is it?” Will asked again, voice hoarse. Jack sighed.

“Beverly Katz has been missing for six days.”

Will looked up, quick and startled. “Six days,” He mouthed, more air than sound. He closed his eyes and shook his head. “Six days,” He repeated, louder now, “And you’re only telling me *now*?”

“We launched an investigation as soon as we knew for sure-”

“You’re the head of the Behavioral Science Unit of the *FBI*,” Will growled, “You *know* how crucial the first 48 hours are in a missing person’s investigation!”

“Which is why I put all of our resources into this case immediately,” Jack yelled back, raising his voice as if he could drown Will out. “In case you have forgotten, *you* no longer work for me.”

“And yet, here you are,” Will said, voice dripping with spite, “Throwing yet another case at me, regardless of my mental health.”

“If you don’t want to help-”

“Of *course* I want to help,” Will hissed, “Beverly was my friend. My *only* friend, as of several weeks ago.”

“Then *help*. Take a look, tell me what you see.”

Will rolled his eyes, flipping through the pages. “It’s not what I can see, which you had to know wouldn’t be much. She wasn’t taken from the apartment. But she was talking to me. You hoped she would have said something, dropped a clue. But you still didn’t come right away. You didn’t come, because you knew what I would tell you.”

“Don’t try to pin this on Hannibal,” Jack warned.

“I’m pointing straight at Hannibal,” Will said, “And you left her to him. You left her with him for *six days*.”

“Hannibal Lecter has no motive! The man openly pined for you *in court*, a man whom I have never seen with a single hair out of place where someone else might see.”

“And wasn’t *that*, convenient?” Will mused. Jack raised his voice and spoke over him.

“You spoke to Beverly less than 24 hours before we estimate she disappeared. What did you speak about?”

“She brought me a case file, I assumed on your behalf,” Will said, giving Bev’s file a pointed look, “I agreed to look, if she would do me a courtesy in return.

“What did you ask for?”

Will stared Jack down, firm, unwavering. “Faith.”

Will was not allowed to keep the file, but it mattered very little. He had memorized every detail, every facet of Beverly’s life that had been laid out before him. He ran through it again, alone in his cell, flashes of color, points of data lining up to map Beverly’s life outside of the BSU, outside of what Will knew of her.

He knew where Beverly must have ended up. What she must have seen, given her disappearance. He knew, with lingering dread and overwhelming sorrow, what had to have become of her. The only thing he couldn’t figure out was what Hannibal had done with the *body.*

It wasn’t the first body he’d made disappear. Abigail’s had vanished as well. But typically, he snatched up a few organs and left the rest to rot, an art piece dedicated to his own brilliance.

Perhaps it was the only way Hannibal could honor them, by consuming them in their entirety. After all, he’d held some measure of affection for Abigail, and presumably for Beverly. Hannibal admired intelligence, and drive. He’d admired Will so hard he’d made him disappear from everyday life entirely. Will thought, with a moment of bitter humor, that perhaps they should check Chilton’s appointment book to find Beverly.

Michelle had liked Beverly, Will recalled, and Beverly had returned her regard. She’d been as attached to Abigail as if they’d been raised together, and that thought set a painful stab through Will that took a long moment to push past. Perhaps it was as simple as that. Maybe Hannibal was reluctant to leave his broken toys lying about where his daughter might see them. He’d shown no fear of her overlooking any other sort of death or destruction, but it would be different with people she knew. People she cared about. Would she still be able to trust her Tėtis, when his pedestal was bolstered up by the corpses of her loved ones?

It had to have been that. Occam’s Razor. The simplest solution was often the truth.

But the thought kept running through his head anyway, over and over again. *What did he do with the body?*

They didn’t take Miss Beverly to the secret house. Not right away, at least. Tėtis would probably take her later, when things were calmer. Right now, he was indulging Michelle’s curiosity, and she was grateful for it.

Miss Beverly slept all the time now. She had a special bag of stuff that helped her rest. Michelle was to leave it alone and let Abigail and Tėtis look after Miss Beverly. But sometimes, Michelle could not leave it alone. She couldn’t wait for Tėtis to decide it was time to show her something.

Sometimes, she just needed to know. In the middle of the night, she crawled from bed, detangling herself from Abigail, and snuck down into the special basement.

Miss Beverly looked like Dead, or at least what Michelle imagined Dead to look like. Her experience was limited, beyond pictures of things that had already rotted away. Michelle had been distraught both times she'd been in a room with a corpse, and Nina at the funeral had been an artificial death, something grown-ups made up to feel better about dying.

Miss Beverly looked like real death, still and silent. She breathed, but it was slow. If Michelle stared, eyes open until they watered and went blurry, then she didn't seem to move at all. Her skin was warm to the touch, though, and it gave where Nina's had been stiff. They put stuff in the corpses, she knew that. Tėtis had explained it to her. They had a whole process where they took out all the old stuff and put in gross new chemical stuff that made dead people smell funny.

But bodies also went stiff when they died. Rigor… Rigor… Rigor something, Michelle couldn't recall the word. She poked at Miss Beverly again to watch her skin depress, pressing hard until the smooth tone of skin gave way to white, and then pulling back to watch the color flow back into the mark from Michelle's fingers.

It was like Sleeping Beauty, she guessed. Like the fairy tale. Except kisses didn't really wake people up from comas, doctors did that.

Michelle tried it anyway, just for fun, just for pretend. She pressed a soft kiss to the dry smoothness of Miss Beverly's cheek, and then got distracted by the dark rivers of her hair.

Miss Beverly had nice hair. Abigail brushed it for her now, kept it free of tangles. Miss Beverly didn't move enough to get tangles, of course, but Abigail would come and move her around, so she didn't get bed sores, and that was enough to tangle some threads.

(*Michelle asked why he lady in the secret house didn't get bed sores, if they weren't always there to turn her. Abigail said she was sometimes awake enough to move herself, if not aware. Michelle didn't know how you could be awake and not aware. It sounded scary, like the opposite of night terrors, the* ***parallel*** *of lying still and stiff in your bed and watching the monsters close in.)*

Abigail was teaching Michelle to braid hair. She practiced it now on the dark locks that spread out over the pillow. Her braids still looked like clumsy knots. Michelle was quick to undo them, tucking Beverly's hair back into place so that Abigail wouldn't know she'd been here.

There was a thrill to doing something you weren't supposed to do, so long as you didn't get caught. This wasn't even like eavesdropping, something that Michelle was also technically not supposed to do, but that Tėtis wanted her to do *well* so that she never got in trouble for it. There was no game here, no challenge to see if she didn't get caught. She was not supposed to be in the basement alone, and it was the normal 'not supposed to.'

But she wanted. She had thought about it, all night. All week. Michelle traced her finger over Miss Beverly's skin again, up over her collar bone, her throat. Tėtis had a bump here. All

men did, the Adam's Apple. Michelle didn't know why, or who Adam was. Some guy who had the first bump, way way back before Tėtis was alive, before anyone she knew was alive, before the whole world as she knew it was alive.

The world was old, ancient. It went on and on, so far back that it made Michelle's head ache to think about it. The world was as old as death, and yet death was different every time.

Michelle poked Miss Beverly's cheek, then again, a little harder. She did not wake up. She was not going to wake up, no matter how much Michelle poked or prodded. She couldn't. Just like death.

An eye for an eye, Tėtis had said. She knew what that meant now, now that he had explained it. It didn't mean literally taking someone's eyes. It meant cruelty in return for cruelty, or kindness in return for kindness. Giving what you received. Michelle didn't even know what she would *do* with an eye. What would anyone do with it?

Probably, there were places you ate eyes. There were places you ate lots of things. Tėtis's kitchen was one of those places, before Michelle, but he had better meals now that she was there to stop him when he got weird. They didn't eat eyes in Tėtis's kitchen. But they ate organs, sometimes, when Michelle was trying not to be picky. And organs lived…

Miss Beverly's shirt pushed up easily. Just a little. Just enough to see her stomach. This was also Not Allowed, Michelle was pretty sure. Not supposed to be here at all, let alone touching, looking, examining. But the organs…

Kidney beans weren't really kidneys, they just looked like them. Before they got cut up and cooked through. Michelle knew where the kidneys lived, Tėtis had showed her. Steak and kidney pie. Michelle hadn't liked the texture, but she'd liked the potatoes. Michelle just about always liked the potatoes.

If they took Miss Beverly's kidneys, Tėtis would probably cut her right about… Michelle hummed, and then traced a line with her fingertip just to the side of Miss Beverly's belly button. Maybe that wasn't right. Maybe the side, or the back, or just further over. But the belly button seemed like a good place to open people up. And then you could see everything, all the organs laid out in their home. Would they move, if Miss Beverly was alive? Or were they still too, except for the lungs?

Michelle traced the line again, with her fingernail this time, and left a red mark in her wake. If they cut Miss Beverly, she would bleed. But she wouldn't hurt. She wouldn't feel anything, with the needle in her hand.

Michelle wondered what it was like to walk around, missing pieces. If you could feel it. If you would know. Would Miss Beverly know? If they cut her open, took something out, and then left her to heal? Stitched her back up like a stuffed animal and waited for the scars?

What was it like, to miss something vital? Did you feel empty? Would you know something was wrong? Michelle traced the shape of a kidney with her fingernail.

"I think that's enough now, Michelle."

The voice startled her. Michelle jumped back and nearly knocked over the IV stand, righting it with a hasty clatter. Tėtis had come for her, standing at the foot of the stairs in his quiet sneaky sock feet. She ducked her head away from his eyes. Tėtis saw too much, when he looked at people. She didn't want to be one of them right now.

"I was just looking!" Michelle insisted, in the time-honored tradition of children who were not 'just looking.' Even children knew that grown-ups were not going to fall for that, but Michelle had to try anyway.

"We don't lie to each other," Tėtis reminded her, but he didn't look angry. Probably. He looked like the face card for 'amused,' with scrunched up happy-eyes.

"I touched a little bit," Michelle admitted, "But just a little bit. I wanted to… I wanted to…" She trailed off. Tėtis never looked at her the way other people did, all funny and twisted up. No matter what she said. But there were some things you weren't supposed to say, weren't supposed to think about. Especially little girls. Michelle could write whole entire books on what people thought little girls shouldn't do.

But Tėtis wasn't people. Tėtis and Abigail and Michelle and Will… They were all something else entirely. Something different.

"I was wondering what it looks like, on the inside," Michelle whispered, tugging Miss Beverly's shirt back over her stomach.

"One day, I'll show you," Tėtis promised, taking her hand, "But for now, we should let Miss Beverly rest. And get some rest ourselves, for school and for work."

Michelle felt suddenly, overwhelmingly tired. Now that she had seen what she came to see, it was like all her sleepiness had come back at once. She held her arms up and couldn't help a little giggle as Tėtis swung her up. Sometimes, being small was annoying, but when she could snuggle close and be carried up the stairs, it was not so bad.

It really was amazing what Will was allowed to get away with, given the fact that he was locked up in a hospital for the criminally insane. Sure, he wasn't allowed to eat decent food, or hide away to use the bathroom, or wear shoes with laces. But he *could* coerce the director into bringing a convicted murderer he was actively afraid of back into the hospital, as well as landing himself some one-on-one time with said murderer. And, of course, there was the Tattle Crime interview. Letting Freddie Lounds do her thing. He'd complained before about resorting to her particular brand of tabloid bile, but it had its uses.

He was, admittedly, a bit surprised to find his admirer standing so close to him. Literally, within touching distance.

"You found a great place to hide," Will mused as the orderly- Brown, he recalled, Matthew Brown- circled him.

“In plain sight,” Matthew agreed, “Spend enough time in the hospital, you learn what they expect. How to act, to get a job as an orderly. They may never even know you were in.”

“You know Chilton has this entire place bugged, don’t you?”

“Who do you think set it up for him?’

Will took a second look at Matthew Brown. Eager, too much so. Hungry for a taste of something he didn’t quite know how to get for himself. And just a bit scared of it, despite the bravado he showed. The Ripper, after all, did not kill with guns. He mutilated people until they died. Matthew let the gun do the work for him and then ripped the corpses apart. Matthew wanted to play with the big boys, but he hadn’t yet figured out that there was more to darkness than just death. A big fish in a small pond, Will mused, swimming around, looking for the lure. Well, Will knew how to play bait.

Matthew was eager to talk about his triumphs, although he waved off Will’s question about the judge.

“I killed the bailiff,” He insisted. “The judge was… someone else.”

He didn’t fill in the blanks. He didn’t have to. Will knew immediately. Without the judge, there would be a mistrial. A clean slate. Will could plead insanity again. *Hannibal*.

Will pushed the thought away, before he could let himself wonder *why*. He didn’t want to know. He was… He was afraid of what he would find.

It didn’t matter. Whatever Hannibal did now, it paled before the things he’d done in Will’s home. To Will. To Michelle. To *Abigail*.

“If you ever need anything, Mr. Graham…” Matthew trailed off pointedly.

He did need something, actually. He needed Hannibal’s head on a platter. He was fairly certain he could coax Matthew into that, too, if he tried even the tiniest bit. Matthew was practically chomping at the bit to impress Will. Will wanted to let him. He wanted Hannibal torn apart for everything he’d put Will through. Everything he’d put Abigail through, the things he had done to their family.

Their family. Michelle, small and sweet and desperately enamored with her Tėtis.

There would be no coming back from Hannibal’s death, not at Will’s hands, or an extension thereof. Will could almost handle the thought of it. He didn’t deserve her anyway. His hands were already stained black with the thoughts that bounced thickly through his skull. But she would be alone, then, well and truly, and Will would not be outside to help her. He would be trapped here, as she dealt with the loss of everyone she loved, all at once. Foster care would be better for her than Will, surely, and absolutely better than any traits the Chesapeake Ripper would seek to foster in her. Alone, though, it was sure to devastate her. At least if Will was out of the hospital, he could visit her. He could calm her fears.

If Will managed to lead someone to evidence against Hannibal, the police would come. It would be rough for Michelle, but Hannibal would live. There was no death penalty in Maryland, after all, not anymore. But if Will sent Matthew Brown, infatuated with violence and his own darkness, he was just as likely to rip Hannibal apart right in front of her, if he could catch Hannibal off guard to begin with. And Will didn't want her anywhere near this man and his bloodlust.

"I'll keep that in mind," Will finally said, allowing himself to be cuffed again.

Matthew Brown came to him again, for dinner. "I mean it, Mr. Graham. Anything."

Will smiled, small and secret, and promised to remember. He could smell the thirst for recognition, wafting up from Matthew's skin like bad cologne. Too eager, Will had thought earlier, and he felt more and more certain as time went on.

Matthew frowned, leaning forward against the bars, encroaching on the small space that was dreadful, yes, but *Will's*. "I thought you'd be a little more excited. Man on the outside, and all that. Thirsty for revenge."

"Well, you know how it's best served, don't you?"

Matthew rolled his eyes. "Justice," He told Will, "Is meant to be swift."

"Swift, perhaps," Will agreed, "But I prefer mine thoroughly planned. I want to be able to enjoy it, after all."

"I'd make sure you enjoyed it," Matthew said, low and fierce, eyes blazing. Suddenly, Will had the sneaking suspicion they were talking about something else entirely. The blaze of bloodlust had lost something, had become a look Will was much more accustomed to seeing on a typical person. A lust of a more traditional kind.

"When I need you, you'll know," Will said, after a long moment where Matthew merely *watched* him.

"I'll know," Matthew agreed, and somehow, Will still felt like they were having two different conversations. He'd just lost the thread of the other.

The knock came while Michelle was in the kitchen with Tėtis, helping to cook. Tėtis was elbow deep in icky icky guts. Michelle was learning that they were not so bad when cooked, but raw they were gross. They squished and made slippery sounds that made Michelle's skin itchy.

Tėtis looked up and frowned. Probably not an invited guest, then. He would have told Michelle about that, anyway. She didn't like sneaky surprises.

"I can get it," She said, unable to resist the burning curiosity, the uncomfortable sharpness of not-knowing. She bolted before Tėtis could say anything, hurrying for the door.

The man who worked at the hospital was still tall tall tall. Michelle peered up at him from the doorway, and her heart went *thump thump thump*. He was at their door. He was not at the hospital with Will. Why wouldn't he be at the hospital with Will, unless something was Wrong. Big and Bad and Capital Letter Wrong.

"Hey," The man said softly, crouching down to her level, "Everything's okay. Will sent me to check on you, and to talk to your Daddy."

"I don't have a Daddy," Michelle informed him, "I have a Tėtis."

"Him, then. I need to talk to him. It's very important, can I come in?"

Michelle could hear Tėtis rinsing his hands quickly in the other room. She hesitated.

"Hey," The man said again, "We're friends, aren't we? You can trust me."

Michelle let him inside. The door closed behind him with a quiet little 'snick.' She didn't know any better. She would wish that she had known better.

———-

"Michelle?"

Hannibal had barely stepped into the hallway when the man pulled out the gun. He froze immediately, looking first to Michelle. She looked unharmed, if startled. She looked between the man and the gun as if they were an equation she couldn't figure out, as if something here had gone completely off-track.

"Let's step away from the front door, shall we?" The man said with an easy grin. "Wouldn't want to bother the neighbors."

He took Michelle by the hand, easy, like he had any right at all to touch her. Hannibal could see the shadowed look that Michelle always got when overwhelmed, blooming across her face like a storm cloud. She followed along as the man backed Hannibal into the kitchen. A mistake, a relief. The man may have held a gun and Hannibal's daughter, but he'd trapped the Chesapeake Ripper in a room full of knives.

"I generally don't invite guests for dinner without at least knowing their name," Hannibal said.

The man smiled, slightly crooked, a bit manic. He tilted his head and showed all his teeth. "I'm the new boyfriend," He said with a laugh, "In a manner of speaking. I'm here on behalf of Will Graham."

Hannibal's eyes shifted to the gun once more, trained on his chest, but wavering with the man's distraction. Will was angry, Hannibal understood this, but surely…"

"Will Graham is not what you think he is."

"And who do you think that *I* think he is?"

“Will is not a killer.”

Another wide, toothy grin. “He wasn’t, was he? Not before the arrest, anyway.” The man bowed with a hint of a flourish. “But he is now. By proxy, at least.”

Ice flooded Hannibal’s being. His heart seemed to skip and falter, clenched tight in his chest. Betrayal. Betrayal he knew he may not have a right to, but one he claimed with a fierce and burning anger.

And then he glanced at Michelle again, at her cold and hollow expression, numb with fear and shutting out the world around her, hand limp where the man held it.

No. Whatever the man said, whatever contempt Will may have held for Hannibal, he would not have done this to their daughter.

“You know that Will is not the man who’s regard you sought, and yet here you are.”

The man tilted his gun this way and that, fidgeting with it one-handed, as if he was bored. “He’s an interesting thing, all on his own. But you knew that, didn’t you? It’s why you set him up.”

Hannibal leaned back against the counter, casual. He kept his hands visible, for now. “You believe Will’s accusations, then?”

“Somebody had to kill the judge,” The man said with a shrug, “And I see what the others don’t. The things that Will Graham sees. Darkness and shadows. Potential.”

“You were admiring the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“I was,” The man agreed. He let go of Michelle’s hand and steadied the gun. “But then I figured, what’s the sincerest form of flattery.”

“Imitation, naturally.”

“Imitation,” the man agreed, “I could learn your murders inside out. I could memorize them.” He laughed, dancing the barrel of the gun across Hannibal’s body, trying to pick his next shot. Hannibal had three knives within arm’s reach, but no right moment to lean towards them.

“Memorization is not the same as knowledge,” Hannibal pointed out, “And a copy will only ever be a copy.”

“Who knows?” The man shrugged. “The Iroquois used to eat their enemies to take their strength. Maybe your murders will become my murders. I’ll be the Chesapeake Ripper now.”

“Only if you eat me,” Hannibal pointed out, a small grin of his own creeping across his face. He slid his hand another inch across the counter.

“I’ll become the new you,” The man continued, as if he hadn’t heard Hannibal. Or perhaps, given the glint in his eyes, as if he knew exactly what Hannibal had been referencing. “Will

Graham and I, together. He may not have been ripe enough for you, but I see him. You've set him down a whole new path, Dr. Lecter."

"Whatever path Will is on is one of his own making," Hannibal told him, "I could never force him to be anything but who he is. I wouldn't want to."

"Well, then we're lucky that who he is happens to be kind of messed up, aren't we?" The man sighed, straightening his aim once more. "I wanted this to be fancier. I had a whole plan. The hanging of Judas. It would have been beautiful. But the munchkin threw a wrench into that one, so you'll have to be satisfied with just dying like the rest of us." He pulled the trigger. Hannibal's hand jerked against the knife he'd grabbed, and it skittered off the counter and out of reach. The gun had not been silenced. It echoed in a violent wave, so loud that Michelle broke her silence, crying out as she slammed her hands over her ears and began to rock. Despite the pain that blossomed in his side, forcing him down to the ground, Hannibal's first instinct was to go to her. He made an aborted move, barely a shift before his wound screamed. He leaned back against the cabinets, sprawled across the floor, bleeding out across the ground.

The man frowned down at Michelle, and then awkwardly ran a hand through her hair. She flinched away from the touch, freezing statue-still again, no longer screaming. Instead, she stared at the blood with wide, unseeing eyes.

"It'll be okay," The man promised her, "We're going on a trip. I have some treats for you. We'll pick up Will, as soon as we can. He misses you."

He may have been speaking to Michelle, but the words sounded robotic, rehearsed. He didn't properly look at her, did not seem to know how to interact with a child. Instead, he turned back to Hannibal, stepping forward and kneeling before him. "We're going to have a lot of fun, Will and I. We- "

He didn't have the time to say anything else. He'd come prepared for Hannibal, full of sweet words for Michelle. He did not, could not, expect Abigail Hobbs, or the way she grabbed ahold of his head and twisted it in one quick, jerking motion.

It wasn't perfect; Abigail was not as strong as Hannibal, nor as practiced. She could not kill a man with a single determined twist. But she could misalign the vertebrae, snap something irreplaceable. The man dropped to Hannibal's floor in a heap, unmoving. Abigail was careful to draw him back, away from the blood.

"I can't stitch this," Abigail said, dropping down to look at the wound. "It's too much blood. You need a transfusion."

"I have some of my blood stored," Hannibal said, "For emergencies. But I would not be able to hide the recovery. It would be better to be seen at the hospital."

"You have some…" Abigail trailed off, then shook her head, "What am I saying, of course you do. So, what do we do with *this*?" She nudged the man with her foot. He did not appear to be entirely conscious, possibly from how hard his head had smacked against the floor, but he let out a pained groan.

“Like Nicholas Boyle,” Hannibal said, hauling himself upright with a gasp of his own. Abigail nodded sharply. Hannibal would have expected her to waver, but it seemed her instincts were less stressful to her in times of crisis. Perhaps if she could explain it as defense, it would weigh less heavily on her. Hannibal would have preferred joy to indifference, but he would take either.

“He panicked when Shelly screamed. Bolted out the door. You didn’t see which way he went.”

Hannibal nodded, accepting his phone from Abigail’s hand. “Into the basement, then. I’ll practice the story with Michelle while we wait for the ambulance.”

Abigail grabbed the man by the shoulders and began to drag him. “Looks like you’ll get your lesson after all, Shell,” She said, sounding much more chipper about it than she had when Hannibal had first suggested it. Hannibal supposed defending her home had put her in a much better mood.

Michelle, stiff as a board, said nothing.

Michelle did well with the paramedics, and Alana, who’d come to tend to her while Hannibal went into surgery. By the time Hannibal woke in his hospital room, Michelle in a chair pulled as close to the bed as she could get it and Jack in the doorway, Michelle’s mood had turned sour.

The first thing Hannibal heard was Michelle’s plaintive whine, “I wanna go home.” The second was a cleared throat, followed by Jack’s determined command.

“Dr. Bloom, would you mind waiting with Miss Michelle out in the hall?”

Alana started to nod. Michelle, with an attitude that could only be attributed to Abigail, though never while Hannibal was around to see, whirled on Jack. “You’ll pry me out of this room over my cold, *dead* body,” She said, which was not an expression Hannibal could recall ever teaching her. She followed it up with “That’s an expression, though, it’s not literal, ‘cause nobody’s dead. It just means no. Extra no.” This, at least, sounded a bit more like his Michelle.

“It seems my boss has spoken, Jack.” Hannibal said, pressing the button that would raise his bed to a sitting position. It sent a new flare of pain through his side, but whatever they had threaded through his IV was doing a decent job of keeping much of it away.

Jack looked disgruntled. No doubt he was used to his team of scientists, who were under obligation to jump through his hoops, or to Will, who jumped through them largely to get Jack to go away. As a man who’d never had children, he was not prepared for the defiance that could come from one who was up far past their bedtime. “The conversation we need to have is not one appropriate for little ears.”

“I don’t have little ears,” Michelle insisted, pushing her hair back behind one of them for emphasis. “I have normal ears.”

“It’s probably boring grown-up talk,” Alana tried, “We could go down to the cafeteria, see if we can pick you up a treat?” It might have worked on another child, a more typical child, but Hannibal did not raise his girls to be typical. Michelle shook her head, meeting Jack’s glare with one of her own, albeit aimed more towards his shoes than his face.

If Jack expected Hannibal to reign in Michelle, he was going to be sorely disappointed. Hannibal was on far too many painkillers to discourage her, even if there were perhaps politer ways to say, ‘go away.’ That required a finesse many adults couldn’t manage, let alone young children.

“Fine,” Jack said, when glaring silently at Hannibal failed to budge Michelle from her chair, “The man who attacked you, his name was Matthew Brown. He was an orderly at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Chilton has already released his employee file to us.”

Hannibal waited, but Jack shot an uncomfortable look at Michelle and did not speak again. Alana hovered between the two of them, fitful and uncertain, before sitting back down in the chair she’d vacated. Hannibal sighed.

“I’m afraid if you’ve hidden a question in there, Jack, the morphine has kept it from me. You’ll need to be more direct.”

“Matthew Brown was frequently assigned to Will’s cell block, and to Will personally. He escorted him to therapy and to his visitor meetings. They had many moments alone.”

Jack seemed reluctant to continue, and Hannibal finally took pity on him. “You want to know if Will sent him in my direction.”

Michelle stiffened. Jack looked profoundly uncomfortable. Hannibal was at a crossroads.

He knew Will. Will would not have put Michelle in harms way, and he would not have considered Matthew’s inept bribery to be any sort of reasonable care.

But he could plant more seeds of doubt in Jack’s mind, seeds that would sway him away from Will’s seemingly baseless accusations.

Then again, Jack needn’t believe Will a murderer to doubt the blame he cast at Hannibal. And Hannibal already had a plan in place for *that*.

“Matthew Brown implied that he intended to take my child with him,” Hannibal said, pulling Michelle into the bed with him, despite the pain and the cramped space. She folded easily, quiet and timid as she had been back in those first few weeks together. She turned away from Jack, pressing her head under Hannibal’s chin. Hannibal held her tightly, and did not need to feign his outrage. “I have often worried about Will’s health, about his mental state. I have never once worried about his love for Michelle. Whatever monster he may be imagining me as, I do not believe him capable of causing her harm.”

Though Jack had been visibly distressed through every moment of Will’s incarceration, this did not seem to be the answer he’d been looking for. No matter. If he thought Hannibal was

willing to lie on Will's behalf, it would only strengthen the belief that Hannibal cared for Will, that he hated to see him where he was. Which was, of course, true, but Jack would use that belief to cancel out any that he felt conflicted.

"You're saying it was a coincidence, then? This man spends time, *unmonitored*, with a man accused of multiple murders, who has openly denounced you to anyone who would listen, and then shows up at your doorstep with a gun. And yet Will had nothing to do with it?"

"On the contrary," Hannibal said, "Will had *everything* to do with it. I believe Mr. Brown may harbor some admiration for Will. He may have thought that killing me would impress him."

"Would he have been right?" From the look on Jack's face, he had not meant to ask that out loud. Nevertheless, Hannibal gave him an answer.

"If I were the monster Will believes me to be, he would not suffer from my death. But he would regret the pain it caused Michelle, and I don't believe Will capable of causing such pain. If you're looking for a different answer, Jack, you won't get one from me."

Jack glared for a moment longer, stiff and unyielding. Hannibal briefly entertained the thought that he would stand there all night, waiting for Hannibal to give him an answer he liked better. Sadly, Alana was ever the peacekeeper.

"I think we've all had a r long night, Jack," She said gently, "Hannibal and Michelle both need their rest, and you probably have a lot of work to do. Maybe we should table this discussion for now."

Jack looked as if he would very much like to turn his glare on Alana, but could not find fault with anything she'd said. He eventually drew himself up to his full height with a nod. "Fine. I'll keep you updated when we find this guy."

"Please do."

Jack stormed out in the same swirl of disgruntled ire he'd come in with, leaving Hannibal to Alana's mercy. Alana blinked at him, red-eyed and yearning. She'd always seen Hannibal as a source of comfort, of rationality. Typically, it was flattering, but right now it was exhausting. Hannibal was strong and fit, with a high tolerance for pain, but he was still a man who'd been shot in the abdomen mere hours before.

Alana looked between Hannibal and Michelle. Hannibal could tell that Michelle was wide awake, attuned to the changes in her breathing that every parent adjusted to, but Alana could only see the back of her hair, the silent stillness she projected.

"If Will was resentful," Alana began, and then could not seem to go any further. She cleared her throat, and tried again, "He's always been so alone. If he felt betrayed-" But she lost herself again, this time with a small, choking sob. Hannibal felt far too tired to be comforting but he reached for her anyway, taking her hand.

“Will would not have done this to Michelle,” Hannibal repeated, firmly and truthfully. “I cannot say what illness and incarceration have done to him. But it is not what you fear, Alana.”

Alana gave a sharp, stiff nod, squeezing his hand back. She looked at his face, his eyes, searching for something. Whatever she found, it encouraged her. She leaned forward, pressing her lips against his.

Hannibal was normally a bit better about things like this. He prided himself on his ability to read a room, knowing a person as intimately as Will could, without Will’s tendency towards stress. It must have been the morphine, therefor, that made the kiss a complete surprise.

Alana pulled back before Hannibal could respond, before he could even think fast enough to determine what response he should try.

“I shouldn’t have done that,” She mumbled, and her gaze dropped back to Michelle’s tangled hair. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Alana- “

“I’m sorry,” She said again, and fled.

Everything was always so loud, in hospitals. Beeping and squeaking and scraping. Bright lights and scratchy sheets. Michelle wanted to be home, in bed with her weighted blanket and her squishy ball, and the pillow with the good smells her Nina made her for night terrors. But instead she was here, with Tėtis, and with Dr. Bloom, and not Abigail and not Will, and everything was *wrong*.

“What shouldn’t she have done?” Michelle asked, even though she knew, she *knew*. Dr. Bloom was friendly, and kind, and she had always been good to Michelle, but she wasn’t supposed to be doing things like *that* with Tėtis. Will was coming home, Tėtis had promised, and he would be mad. Michelle was mad.

“That’s not what you want to ask me, is it?” Tėtis nudged her until she sat up properly to look at his cheekbones. She liked his cheekbones. They were a good place to look instead of eyes.

It wasn’t. Not really. She didn’t need the answer to that question. She needed the answer to the Bad question, the one that tick tick ticked inside of her, closer and closer to making her go *boom*, to making her into a million broken pieces. Tėtis waited, patient. He was always patient. Michelle didn’t know how to be patient, didn’t know how to push down the pressing, burning *need* she always felt.

“…*Did* Will send that man to us?”

The corners of Tėtis’s mouth turned down, and his eyebrows tilted down too, just like the face card for sad.

“You’ve been listening tonight, haven’t you?”

Michelle shrugged and began to tap her hands against Tėtis's chest, until he bundled her hands into his big ones and guided them up to his chin instead. Michelle focused on his face as hard as she could, with everything she had. "Sometimes the truth we have to tell other people, and the truth we tell each other, they're not always the same thing."

"No, they're not," Tėtis agreed. He lifted her hands up a little higher, guiding. "But listen to me very closely, please."

"Listening."

"Will loves you. *I* love you. Neither of us is going to let anything happen to you. Neither of us would hurt you. Do you understand?"

"Understand," Michelle parroted back, falling back on old habits from when she'd been very small, and words had seemed so very big. When it was just her and Tėtis, when she was learning how to be Michelle Lecter instead of Michelle Holt.

"Atta girl," Tėtis praised, and kissed her forehead, "Now, why don't we both get some rest?"

"I don't think I'm allowed to stay," Michelle said, even as she let Tėtis tuck her in alongside him, "I don't think I'm even supposed to be here this late."

"Well, we'll just see how long we can get away with breaking the rules, shall we?"

"Okay."

Chapter End Notes

So, yeah. That happened.

This is not getting updated when I WANTED to update it, but I'm happy with what I wrote. Now, onto the rambles:

I TOLD YOU TO TRUST ME. I SAID 'GUYS, JUST TRUST ME,' AND NOT A SINGLE ONE OF YOU DID!

So, Beverly is alive. I couldn't kill Bev, guys, I just couldn't. I'm actually running around trying to figure out who to kill off next because so far, everyone is insisting on being *necessary.*

This chapter is really fucking creepy. Michelle is really fucking creepy. But the thing is, guys, if any of you are surprised, you shouldn't be. I have been dropping hints so hard, since all the way back in the beginning of FoC. Specifically, in Chapter 4 of Family of Choice, I dropped a hint that nobody seemed to pick up on, or if they did, no one

brought it up to me, then or since. It is only fitting that I bring it back now, in chapter four of the sequel:

"Did you hurt the baby, Michelle?"
"Not me. ***Not this time."***

So yeah. When Michelle's bio-mom was ranting about Michelle and talking crap about her own kid? Saying things like how weird Michelle was? So uh... Not everything she said was truthful, obviously, which everyone picked up on. But she wasn't entirely lying, either. The kids are not alright. But as much as everyone hates Hannibal right now, this one's not actually his fault. Michelle came to him like this. Although, Hannibal probably did not help.

(Sidenote: I'm not saying Michelle was evil or irreparably damaged when Hannibal got her. She was just a kid in a bad situation who didn't have any good example of how to behave, and who was neglected and abused enough to start lashing out. In my head, the parents favored her brother and that just made things worse. None of this was Michelle's fault, and even with her creepiness, she's *still* better off with Hannibal, who would at least probably not encourage violence against other children. Probably.)

Michelle is doing better on the whole 'relating to others' thing, but only on people she claims. She is largely mistrustful of people who are not family or in some other way useful/important to her (EX: She had genuine affection for Nina, though Nina was not 'family,' and while she feels no affection for Matthew Brown, she trusts him because he did something for her that was important.)

Matthew decided to take things into his own hands when Will didn't send him, in hopes that it would impress Will. He clearly knows, in canon, that Will is not the Chesapeake Ripper, so I'm not entirely sure what his motivation there was, but in this fic I'm going with 'Murder Crush.' I'm pretty sure it's Murder Crush in the show, too. Will might not be the Ripper, but Matthew sees something reflected in him that he likes.

Michelle's going to have some guilt, going forward. So is Abigail. And as for Hannibloom... Well, we haven't seen the last of that, but it is not going to go like the show did.

So, guys. I know when I first started, I had a regular update schedule, and I don't anymore. And I know you all really like this fic, and I have actively encouraged people towards my tumblr to ask me questions. But please, before you do, check the tags and my post history to see what I've said? I had well meaning anons popping up into my inbox to ask me to write more of this fic, despite the fact that I had repeatedly said it was coming, but slow because of work and depression, and it was a very upsetting time for me, and presumably to the anons who thought they were being nice. Just. If I say my writing is slow because I am severely depressed, please understand that asking me when I'm going to update really doesn't help, no matter how nice you are about it.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tėtis checked himself out of the hospital as soon as he could stand, against doctor's orders. Generally, Abigail had told Michelle, people were supposed to be supervised when recovering from gunshot wounds, but Tėtis already knew what signs to look for, and Michelle had been very uncomfortable sleeping in Dr. Bloom's spare bedroom. She didn't know what to say to Dr. Bloom, who had done a Bad Thing and was pretending she hadn't.

Tėtis picked Michelle up as soon as he could, and took a few days off work. He spent a good deal of them at the harpsichord. He always composed, when he felt big, unbearable moods. Angry and sad and excited. Somewhere was a sheet of papers with Michelle's name on them, her first Christmas present, the melody he'd written about when she first came to stay.

Michelle didn't understand how music without words could really mean anything, but the song that was just for her was pretty, light and airy. She had a recording of it on her iPod, and sometimes, on a bad day, she would sprawl out on her back and stare up at the ceiling, listening to the notes rising and falling. She would close her eyes and go away somewhere, somewhere safe.

The song that Tėtis was composing didn't sound like somewhere safe. For one thing, it wasn't done yet, so sometimes the notes would build and build only to cut off, abrupt and off-kilter. For another, Tėtis made a funny face when he composed it.

Michelle was supposed to be with Abigail, but when Abigail had Big Important things to do in the basement, she would creep to the doorway of the family room, and watch. Listen. Let the music thrum through her body in great waves.

"Michelle."

The notes came to a stop. Michelle was lost, empty, adrift. Her face flushed. She stumbled over the Bad Foot and tripped her way into the room.

"It's rude to hover in doorways," Tėtis told her, but he smiled when he said it and patted the seat of the bench next to him. Michelle scrambled towards the invitation, always eager to press herself under the heavy weight of Tėtis's arm. He pulled her close and watched with a tiny smile as she poked curiously at the keys.

"You're getting better," He told her, when she made an eager attempt at Chopsticks.

"My hands are still too small," She complained. Tėtis placed his big hands over hers and carefully guided her through a few notes. It sounded better when he helped. They played together, Chopsticks and then something light and easy she'd learned a few months earlier and then forgotten entirely. Michelle leaned into him and for a long moment, it was just her and Tėtis and the music.

That moment ended, though. All moments ended, but lately it seemed that they came and went too quickly for Michelle to tuck them into memory. Tėtis never forgot anything, but Michelle forgot *lots* of things. Supposedly, that was part of growing up, because growing up sucked and had absolutely no benefits that Michelle could see. Except maybe getting to drive yourself to the ice cream store.

“You didn’t used to keep so many secrets from me,” Tėtis said softly. Michelle stared down at the keys and tried to remember a time when things were easy, when words flowed from her faster than she could think them up, and she would trip and stumble over her stories, but Tėtis listened anyway. Tėtis always listened.

“He said he was the new boyfriend,” Michelle said, the first of many thoughts that bounced through her head and made her ache.

“Will has not replaced us,” Tėtis assured her, “He acquired an admirer who did not know when to step back. Nothing that man said to you was the truth.”

Michelle knew that. Of course she knew that. If he was lying about Will sending him, he had to be lying about everything else. It was just that… Well… There was a difference between *knowing* something and having it be confirmed by someone like Tėtis, who knew just about *everything*. That was all.

Michelle fidgeted on the bench. Her feet didn’t reach the floor, not like this, and she swung them back and forth, careful not to kick the harpsichord. Harpsichord was a big word, a good word. All the best words were big. ‘Harpsichord,’ and ‘lackadaisical,’ and ‘substantial.’

‘Accountability.’

“I let him in,” Michelle told the floor, because it was easier than telling Tėtis. And this was yet another thing that Tėtis already knew, but it was different coming from her mouth, ripping out of her chest.

“You did,” Tėtis agreed, “You put faith in him because he had done you a kindness.”

Michelle put faith in him, and he had tried to murder her Tėtis. She kicked out a little harder. Tėtis placed a hand on her calf, stilling her.

“I trusted him,” She said, and her voice broke. Her face was wet. She couldn’t remember when she’d started crying.

“Trust is a tricky thing,” Tėtis told her. “It can feel good, to trust someone. It can also leave us open to vulnerability.”

“Do you trust Will?” Michelle looked up at him, and her heart thudded, thump thump thump, in her chest. Tėtis smiled. It was not ‘happiness.’

“I trust that Will still has much to show us,” Tėtis said, and it was not an answer. Michelle did not ask again.

Jack Crawford walked with purposeful, heavy steps. Will didn't grant him the intimidated look he so clearly craved. He watched him from his metal cage with one eyebrow raised, curious.

"Earlier this week," Jack said, when he finally came to stand in front of Will, "An orderly from this hospital attacked and shot Dr. Lecter in his own home, before fleeing the scene."

Matthew Brown had not shown up to Will's cell in several days. Will had suspected him of being up to something troublesome, but whatever he had expected, it had not been this. Matthew had been waiting on a signal, and Will, as far as he knew, had not given one.

Will felt several things at once. First, a growing, sinking dread. This lingered in his chest, thick and black as tar, dragging down each breath. And, beneath that, an undercurrent of vicious, horrifying glee. Then, shame, guilt.

Concern.

Concern for Hannibal Lecter. Concern for the Chesapeake Ripper. Concern for his lover, Michelle's Tėtis. A moment of overwhelming, drowning, *fear*.

Will wasn't sure which of these warring emotions showed on his face, but whatever it was, it surprised Jack. He faltered, shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Looked Will in the face, curious and uncertain.

"Is he alive?" Will couldn't hold back the question, even if he wanted to. It had been a sour, screaming thing in his mouth, more need than want. For a moment, Jack let him wait for it. Will wasn't sure which answer he wanted.

"He was struck in the abdomen. He had surgery to remove the bullet and has already checked himself out of the hospital."

Relief, thick and cloying, flooded Will's senses. He staggered, leaning forward against the bars. Until this very moment, he hadn't realized how much of him still sang for Hannibal, for the man Will had believed him to be. It nauseated him.

He'd thrown Jack off-kilter again. He eyed Will warily, a flicker of disbelief written across his skin.

"And you knew nothing about this."

Will glanced up with a frown, waving vaguely at the echoing room around them. "Oh, you know. With all my hobbies, I haven't had time to read the papers."

There we go, there was Jack's stubborn glare. Will was not surprised to have blame levered at himself. He wasn't even irritated, at this point. What was one more thing he didn't do? Why not carry that guilt as well, another cross against his back?

"We believe this is the same man who killed the bailiff and the judge at your trial," Jack told him.

“Just the bailiff. The Chesapeake Ripper killed the judge.”

“And you, of course, just happen to know this.”

“He told me,” Will said, straightening up. “He liked to brag. Chatty for an orderly. Usually they ignore me.”

“And you didn’t report this?”

Once more, Will spread his arms wide. “You have a history of doubting things when I don’t hand you the evidence on a silver platter.”

“This isn’t about Hannibal- “

Will rolled his eyes, “I believe we’ve already established that this is *entirely* about Hannibal. He did get shot, didn’t he?”

“You’re shockingly stoic for a man whose lover just survived an attempt on his life.”

“*Ex*-lover,” Will reminded him, a flush across his cheeks. It was both embarrassment and irritation; had Jack missed his momentary stumble against the bars? Or was he merely dismissing it because it didn’t suit his narrative. “And the keyword there is ‘survived.’ Make your point, Jack.”

“You were frequently alone with this Matthew Brown. The cameras would mysteriously shut off.”

“Those *pesky* electronics,” Will mused, “Nudge a cord too roughly and it fails entirely. Make. Your. *Point*.”

Jack took a step closer. Perhaps he thought he could still intimidate Will, but Will had long since lost the need to assuage Jack’s ill temper.

“You’ve been very vocal about your distrust of Hannibal. A little whisper into the ear of a man who’d already proven to be unstable…”

“I’d proven to be unstable when you hired me,” Will reminded him, “At least according to Alana Bloom. Instability is not a crime, Jack.”

“But murder *is*,” Jack said, loud and booming in the cavernous room, “Including by proxy.”

Will leaned back, arms folded across his chest. “Nothing I said made this happen.”

“Then what did?”

Will let a small smile creep across his face. “Instability,” He said, with a small shrug. “Perhaps he was looking to prove himself. He admired the Ripper.”

“He admired *you*.”

“He admired *the Ripper,*” Will stressed again, louder this time, the better to be heard over the rage that emanated from Jack. “What form that admiration took was beyond me to stop. Or to encourage.”

“Hannibal Lecter has no *motive*,” Jack said, not for the first time.

“The Ripper kills in sounders of three or four. Quick, right after the other, and do you know why, Jack?” Will leaned forward, draping his arms through the bars of his cage. “Because if he waits too long,” He hissed, “The meat spoils.”

Beverly had not passed on this particular tidbit. Will had known she wouldn’t, skeptical as she had been. He could see Jack’s jaw working, chewing over the thought in a near-literal sense. He could see the initial wave of disgust, too quick for Jack to beat it down with doubt. He’d be remembering every meal he ate at Hannibal’s table. Just as Will had.

“If the Ripper’s killing,” Will told him, little more than a whisper, “You can bet Hannibal Lecter’s planning a dinner party.”

Michelle was watching Alana with wary, suspicious eyes. Hannibal had tried to shoo her towards the family room, but even the suggestion of one of her craft kits had failed to deter her desire to ‘help.’ It was, evidently, more of a desire to ‘supervise.’ She said little, and stayed at the stool Hannibal had given her, rolling balls of cookie dough for dessert. Yet, every time Alana stepped within touching distance, Michelle’s entire body would stiffen up, and her hands would still over the dough, watchful. Wary. They would have to discuss things later; Michelle needed to understand that social connections could only be good for them at this point.

“Heart’s an interesting choice,” Alana mused, “Will Michelle eat it?”

“If seasoned properly, she may taste,” Hannibal told her, “But I’ll likely be frying cheese sandwiches in a skillet later.”

“Promise you’ll share?” Alana called across the room. Michelle stared at her for a long moment before giving a small, sharp nod. The corners of Alana’s mouth turned down, and she turned back to whisper to Hannibal.

“I don’t think she enjoyed our little sleepover. I did all the fun babysitter things! Popcorn, too much television, cookie dough, late bedtimes. I thought she was just worried about you, but she’s still so stiff around me.”

“Children are fickle things. Whatever offense Michelle has latched onto, she’ll forget it soon enough.” Children were fickle, but Michelle never forgot anything. Alana, however, did not know that, and she seemed marginally cheerier by the time he handed her several skewers.

“Skewered heart,” Alana murmured. Her lips quirked up into a smile, but there was nothing pleasant about the way her hands trembled, ever so slightly. “Haven’t we had enough of that?”

“It’s a thematic dish,” Hannibal agreed, “My heart certainly feels skewered.”

Alana pierced through another chunk of meat. “He told me he loved you,” She admitted in a whisper, eyes flicking over towards Michelle. “In the hospital, when he was first diagnosed with the encephalitis.”

Hannibal had suspected that Will had said something, given the way Alana danced around Hannibal with a steadily growing nervousness, but to hear it confirmed set a small flutter through his chest. Will had a way of awakening things that Hannibal had long imagined to be dead. “You are a member of a very exclusive club, then,” He said, “Will said it to me once, but he was in the middle of a very stressful episode at the time. He never repeated it. I had assumed it was the stress talking.”

Alana stared down at the meat in her hands. The faint tremor that gave away her trepidation was spreading upwards. “I know what you said,” She whispered, “I *know*. But I also know what I’ve seen of Will, since he was arrested. He’s not the man he was before.”

It was interesting, how people fell into place so easily, even when Hannibal was no longer attempting to prod them. “Are any of us who we were before?” Hannibal asked, placing a gentle hand over her own.

Alana blinked up at him, eyes filled with tears. For a moment, Hannibal thought she might try to kiss him again.

Then, behind him, Michelle accidentally knocked the bowl of cookie dough to the floor. It skittered across the tile, loud and echoing enough that Michelle let out a distressed moan. The moment ended.

Will could hear the steady click-click of shoes on the harsh concrete floor. You could set your watch by the guards. He supposed that was good for people who were actually crazy. Well, people who were crazy *and* who weren’t Abel Gideon.

“I’m told,” Gideon began, and Will could hear the heavy smirk that must have lingered around his mouth, “That I have *you* to thank for my safe return to these hallowed halls.”

“Don’t thank me for signing your death warrant,” Will warned.

“I’m safe in here, Mr. Graham. Safe from myself. Safe from the Ripper. Can’t get to me through all the locks.”

“There’s nowhere you’re safe, Gideon. Your number was up the second they stuck you in the cell next to mine.” Will tilted his head back, counting smudges and cracks along his ceiling. “Everyone who gets too close gets got.”

“We have that in common, the Ripper and I.” Gideon shaped sentences like the mouth of a shark, sharp-edged and aimed to cut. Will imagined the shudder that would likely ripple down Chilton’s spine when he sat down to listen.

“You kill anyone who steps too close to you. The Ripper kills anyone who steps too close to *me*.”

“A jealous god, your killer.”

Will smiled into the empty room. “Careful, you’ll flatter him.”

“That can only help me now, if he’s as eager for blood as you say.”

“Dr. Lecter is always eager for blood.”

A slow, steady intake of breath. Neither of them insulted each other by acting surprised.

“And we get to the very heart of the matter, at last. Tell me, were you disappointed when your attempt failed?”

Will closed his eyes and tried to sooth the rolling turmoil in his gut. “I didn’t send that man to kill Hannibal.”

“And yet, without you, he never would have gone. Funny how little differences our intentions make, in the end.”

“Were you disappointed, when you killed your wife?” Will shot back.

“I was disappointed I could only do it once,” Gideon whispered, a sliver of ice, of the darkness he leaked from his very pores. “And yes, disappointed that it had to happen at all. She was a lovely, obnoxious little thing. You know the type. Feisty on a good day, shrill on a bad one. I miss her more each day.”

Will picked the sentences apart for the hints he knew were there and let out a low chuckle. “But you’d do it again.”

“Oh absolutely. Slower, given the chance. She’s much more beautiful in memory than she was in life. But you didn’t bring me here to talk about my wife.”

“I brought you here to bear witness.”

“To tell you I sat in Dr. Lecter’s cobalt blue dining room. An ostentatious herb garden with Leda and the Swan over the fireplace and you having a fit in the corner. His tiny little blonde thing staring up at all of us with dark eyes wide as saucers and absolutely no surprise on her face. That’s where I asked him if he was the Chesapeake Ripper, and *he* avoided the question and suggested I kill Alana Bloom.”

Gideon’s words faded beneath the roaring in Will’s ears. He’d remembered bits and pieces before then. A twisting Jekyll/Hyde shape, Hobbs and Gideon at the head of the table, Hannibal’s rough, calloused hands against the soft skin of his face. Michelle, he had known, had to have been there, somewhere. He remembered her for certain when he awoke, her little body curled up atop his, clinging.

But now, the room twisted. The sink, the cot, they slithered from his vision like snakes, and he was suddenly looking down at big brown eyes.

“Will,” Michelle whispered to him, lips red and splattered with blood, “Will, there’s nobody there.”

She whispered it in between the beating of Will’s own heart, and he saw now, saw the way her fingers twitched as she lied to him.

He was hurt, but more so he was hurt by *Hannibal*, yet again. Hannibal sitting back and encouraging Michelle in her knife-sharp broken edges. And so unbearably, violently angry at the thought of Gideon’s eyes on her, at the thought of her standing there, feet from a man who’d decorated the world with a smattering of organs on a whim.

If Hannibal didn’t eat Gideon, Will might consider it.

“Tell Jack Crawford that,” Will hissed, “Tell him every single word.” And maybe then, perhaps, Jack might think of something other than his own bloodthirst. Might think of *Michelle* and the creeping tendrils that were dragging her down.

“I’ll tell Jack Crawford anything you want, if *you* tell me why Dr. Lecter did it?”

Why did Dr. Lecter do anything? “He wanted to see what would happen.”

And later, when Gideon had failed him, as Will suspected he would, when he looked Jack in the eyes and lied, Will would know it was more of Gideon’s mimicry, of the way he mirrored everyone, lacking his own sense of self. A parrot, hopping from branch to branch to find meaning. Throwing Will under the bus, all because he *wanted to see what would happen*.

“I feel like I’ve been watching our friendship on a split screen,” Hannibal whispered. Will looked stiff, uncomfortable. He had never been one for eye contact, but now his gaze danced somewhere around Hannibal’s tie, the sharp lines of his suit. Hannibal wanted those eyes on him more than he’d wanted anything else for a long time. He burned with the need. “The friendship I’ve perceived on one side, and the truth on the other.”

“Terrible feeling, isn’t it?” Will growled at him, but he fidgeted as well, fingers twisting around the bars. Hannibal saw more of Michelle in him every time they spoke, more of the ways they’d begun to bleed into each other. He immortalized each and every one of those moments into his memory palace, into the room he’d built for the two of them to share, for all the ways she was their daughter together, all the ways she drew her development from Will.

In his memory palace, Will held Michelle, balanced on his hip, and Hannibal was free of regret.

“You understand your role in Beverly’s disappearance, don’t you?”

Will snarled. His lips drew back over sharp teeth that Hannibal had memorized, that he imagined imprinted against the arch of his neck. “Have you come here to lay blood at my

feet? I'm afraid you'll have to wait in line."

"She disappeared while investigating the crimes which you are accused of," Hannibal said, as if he was not off-kilter just from the fire that fueled Will's rage, that flooded vivid blue eyes with venom, "At *your* behest. You must be as angry with yourself as you are with whoever took her."

"*Took*," Will spat, and Hannibal allowed himself a moment of glee, of the excitement that came with being the smartest person in the room, even if Will chased at his tail the whole way up the ladder, "As if we both don't know what's happened to her. And believe me, I am singularly angry with whoever took her."

"It seems you're leaving a trail of victims wherever you go," Hannibal mused. He shifted and allowed himself to wince at the pain. He could see a hint of something in Will's eyes, something mournful and longing. Good. Whatever he'd left within Will, it still lingered. Will's sense of betrayal had not yet burned it out of him.

"If you've come seeking an apology, I'm afraid you've found the wrong man The guards forget we're sane enough to have ears. They like to gossip. I heard they sighted Matthew Brown down in North Carolina, last."

Yes, Hannibal had heard the same news. It had brought a smile to Abigail's face, the barest hint of a giggle. The rush of getting away with something had done a great deal to ease her fears.

"I almost expected better of you," Will continued, and the spark of longing became a wave of disappointment that, to Hannibal, could not have been entirely feigned. "I didn't send that man to your doorstep, Hannibal. I'd have given him a better plan if I had."

"One that would not have risked Michelle," Hannibal agreed, just to see Will flinch. "She's been having nightmares about it. About the things Mr. Brown claimed about you."

Will startled badly enough to smack his hand against the bars, leaning as far towards Hannibal as his cage would allow. "I would *never* have sent him anywhere near her," He vowed, with more emotion than any of the artifice he'd so far displayed.

"I know," Hannibal assured him, "And yet, through my association with you, he found her. In his desire to protect you, he very nearly shattered her."

Hannibal let that sink in, let the thought of Michelle wring guilt through Will's body. There was, if he was honest with himself, a hint of truth to the betrayal he portrayed. It had not been Will's idea, not his fault, but neither had Matthew Brown hunted Hannibal down of his own accord.

Hannibal had been trying. He had tried luring Will back to him with kindness, with the gift of his testimony and then of the judge's body when that failed. Now, he would have to try something new. If he was lucky, perhaps he could get Will to miss him.

And, if that failed, he could always apologize after the trap he was laying had been sprung.

“I have to look out for my daughter, Will. And for myself. I wonder how many other people will be hurt by the anger you carry with you.”

Hannibal saw his words hit home with painful precision. Will made an abortive motion, a hand jerking out as if to reach for Hannibal. It was surprisingly painful to witness.

“Hannibal- “

“I’ll give Alana Bloom your best. Goodbye, Will.”

Perhaps Will growled behind him. Perhaps Hannibal only imagined the crackle of jealousy.

He would carry the sound with him anyway.

The party was loud loud loud. Michelle hated it.

Abigail was long gone, along with Miss Beverly, off to the quiet house by the sea. Michelle tucked herself under a table and tried to remember the crash of the waves, over and over, a rhythm of safety. Before she’d left, she’d braided Michelle’s hair and smeared a sticky pink shine over her lips. Michelle had liked the way it looked, but not the way it felt. She’d licked it off hours ago, before the first guest even arrived.

The people whispered and laughed and shouted. The musicians played on and on in her head. Michelle laid herself out on the ground under the table and watched people’s feet go by. She was hungry. She’d had a long cylindrical bit of rolled meat that she’d liked, but the funny bird leg things had made her nauseous. She knew, if she asked, that Tėtis or Dr. Bloom, would grab her a dessert or maybe even a sandwich, but then everyone would know she was a little little little kid who couldn’t even handle a dinner party.

Mr. Crawford had shiny shoes and a big booming voice. Michelle liked the shoes more. They reflected the light as he came to talk to Tėtis. Tėtis’s shoes had a lace that was starting to come untied. It would bother him, if he knew, but Michelle couldn’t make herself move to tell him. Her body felt heavy, too big and too small all at once.

Mr. Crawford wanted to take some of the food home. It set off warning bells in Michelle’s head, though she couldn’t quite remember why. It seemed rude, somehow, to come all the way here and then steal their food. He hadn’t even said hi to her. Michelle had wanted to ask about Bella Bella Bella.

Mr. Crawford’s shoes squeaked against the tile. Michelle watched him go and counted his steps and wondered why Tėtis hadn’t moved yet, why his shoes were so still, just watching Mr. Crawford leave. Her thoughts went round and round and round, until she had to close her eyes under the weight of them.

Tėtis found her still under the table, after the party had ended, fast asleep.

Michelle woke to the sound of the door, the thunk thunk thunk of Tėtis’s feet on the stairs.

She was in her own bed, big and empty without Abigail. She was thirsty, and more than that, she was curious. Down the hall, to the top of the stairs, lingering, listening.

“Where were you, last night?” Jack Crawford was big and booming, too loud for the early hour.

“I was here.” Tėtis, calm and steady like always.

“All night?”

“Yes.”

“And I don’t suppose there’s anyone above the age of 8 who can verify that?” Michelle stiffened, straightening up. She knew it was offensive, even if she couldn’t put into words *why*.

Before she could say anything, though, Dr. Bloom passed by with a gentle touch to her shoulder.

“Don’t worry,” Dr. Bloom whispered as she headed down the stairs, “I’ll take care of it.”

Dr. Bloom was wearing Tėtis’s shirt. Michelle watched her go with a heavy, unspeakable thing blossoming in her chest.

Alana had been easy, too easy. He hadn’t needed to ply her with wine, they had plied each other. Tucked into bed, wrapped around each other, the sedative in Alana’s drink slowly overtaking her.

“We shouldn’t,” She’d whispered against his mouth, “Your daughter is… Is just down the hall.”

“Sound asleep,” Hannibal had assured her, trailing kisses down her throat to emphasize his point.

“We’ll get a babysitter,” Alana had promised, “Next time. Will there be a next time?”

Hannibal had cupped the soft curve of her hip in his hands and whispered promises into her ears. She’d drifted off with one hand pressed to his chest and the other trailing circles over his hipbone.

She was a beautiful woman, and intelligent. If need be, Hannibal would have no trouble slipping into and out of intimacy with her. But he was glad it hadn’t come to that, if only to ensure she successfully drank the sedative. Besides that, he’d had a busy night, and it wouldn’t have done to have been worn out when the time came to carry Abel Gideon into the basement.

Jack was right on schedule, although Hannibal had hoped to have another hour to sleep in. Sleep was very important, when one was a parent.

Alana, likewise, was perfectly timed, as if Hannibal had nudged her into the room himself. She stared Jack down with narrowed eyes and a tight frown. Jack held his hands up, as if waving off the truth of his own actions.

“I’m not here to accuse Hannibal of anything. Only to ask him his whereabouts.”

“That’s not all you were asking.”

Hannibal had known, of course, that the time would eventually come when Will’s prodding was too much for Jack to ignore. His Will was a clever beast, coercive and deadly in equal measures. He had spent too long laying a trail to Hannibal’s door for Jack to put it off forever. It was why Hannibal had tucked his more intriguing meats away, for the time being, and served pork at the dinner party.

Jack’s song and dance with the Tupperware had only confirmed Hannibal’s suspicions. Honestly, it was a wonder anyone at the FBI got anything done, if they were all as obvious as Jack had been.

Jack beat a hasty retreat after Alana confronted him, a wary smile lingering over his features. If he’d hoped to lull Hannibal back under his sway, it was clear from his expression that he understood his own failure.

“A census taker would have been better,” Alana mused once he was gone, calling back Hannibal’s words from the bedroom.

“Certainly less stressful,” Hannibal agreed. Alana chuckled and crossed the room, caressing his face with a soft palm.

“I don’t suppose you have an appetite, after that? Michelle’s up, I make some awesome Mickey Mouse pancakes.”

Hannibal was sure he must have been making an *interesting* expression, but he was distracted by the way Alana leaned in, nuzzling against his cheek. She really was a bright light in the world, sweet and fiercely defensive. In another timeline, perhaps. But in this timeline, there was Will, and the strange sound of dragging from above, and…

With a clamorous series of clanking thuds, the upper half of the samurai armor from Hannibal’s bedroom came crashing down the stairs. Alana yanked herself out of his arms with a startled gasp as they both hurried to the hallway for a better look.

The armor had been a gift from Lady Murasaki. It would have been too heavy for Michelle to move in its entirety, not to mention twice her size, but she’d managed the helmet and the chest plate, both of which laid in a crumpled heap in the middle of the hall. They’d dented themselves on the way down the stairs, crashing against each other and the hardwood floor. Despite Hannibal’s best efforts over the coming months, they would never be quite the same again.

Nor, it seemed, would his sweet little girl. Hannibal looked up to find himself the full bearer of Michelle’s darkened gaze. There was a fury in her that would have seemed horrifically

uncanny on any other child, but Hannibal had witnessed a variety of unpleasant moods from Michelle. Her fists were clenched, little body trembling with the force of her emotions. As he watched, she drew in a few huge, gasping breaths, and then reached for her next projectile, a delicate vase from the hall outside her room.

“Michelle-“ She threw the vase before Hannibal could get another word out. He suspected she’d been aiming for his head, given her gaze. Backed with all the strength of a young child, however, it shattered into pieces a few feet from Alana’s position instead. With a shaking, shuddering intake of breath, Michelle turned and fled down the hall. Hannibal could hear a lock click behind her.

“Well…” Alana said slowly, “That could have gone better.”

“Indeed.”

“Michelle.” Tėtis rapped on her door for the fourth time in as many minutes. Michelle glared and gave it a kick. “Michelle,” He reprimanded, “You know I have a key.”

“Then go get it,” Michelle told him, delivering another swift kick to the heavy wood. Her feet ached, but it was worth it to imagine the frown Tėtis would be making.

“I am attempting to respect your privacy and independence,” Tėtis said, in his stiff other-people voice. Michelle wanted to rip it from his throat. She imagined the voice box as a literal box, something she could open and tear to pieces and replace with only the Good Things. “You are making it difficult,” Tėtis continued.”

“I’m not letting you in to yell at me.”

“I wasn’t going to yell at you.”

Michelle eyed the doorway suspiciously. Tėtis had never lied to her yet, but he’d also never invited some not-Will person into their lives. Or anyone into their lives, without asking her first. Michelle had picked Nina, she had picked Will and Abigail. Dr. Bloom, as far as Michelle could tell, had picked herself. And she could go *un*pick herself, in Michelle’s opinion.

“Michelle,” Tėtis said, soft and gentle, “Dr. Bloom has gone home. Abigail will not be back until nightfall. It’s just the two of us. Open the door.”

It *was* just the two of them, and that was the problem. It should have been the four of them, Tėtis and Will and Abigail and Michelle. Maybe Will’s dogs, if they were lucky. But they didn’t have that, they didn’t have any of that, because Tėtis was *stupid* and he made *stupid* choices and had *stupid* decorations. They looked better broken.

Michelle said as much to the door and enjoyed the deep sigh that came from beyond it. “It would be much easier to discuss this face-to-face, Michelle. Please.”

It was the ‘please’ that threw her. Tėtis was always polite, of course, but he didn’t beg or plead or cajole. He asked, and you either did the thing, or you didn’t.

He was pleading now, though, or at least, she thought he must be. Tones were so weird. People’s voices went up or down or left or right and you had to figure out what that meant, how that changed the words they said.

But at least it very definitely wasn’t sarcasm. Michelle opened the door and let Tėtis in.

He didn’t touch her, at least. He sat on the edge of her bed, and she sat on the fluffy green rug, and they stared at each other.

“You’re not typically destructive,” Tėtis finally said. Michelle shrugged.

“You broke something I like, I broke something you like.”

“Do you think I’ve broken Will?”

The question made her uncomfortable. It reminded her of bad dreams, of Will shaking in the dining room, shaking and sweating and seeing dead men. Of lying, because Will was sick and would believe her. “I think you might.”

“But I haven’t yet,” Tėtis said gently. “Will’s a strong man. It would take a lot more than me to break him.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” Michelle said, angry and shaking with it. “It’s easy to break somebody who trusts you.”

Tėtis stared at her for a long moment. “That’s an astute observation for someone your size,” He finally said. Michelle stuck her tongue out at him.

“The doctor said it wasn’t my fault I was so little.”

“That wasn’t quite what I meant,” Tėtis said, and smiled like they were joking. Michelle wasn’t joking. She’d never found anything less funny in her entire life.

“Everything’s ruined,” She said. The tears wouldn’t come, but they were strangling her. “Abigail can’t go outside, and Will is in prison and everything is *ruined,* and I hate it, I hate everything, and I hate your stupid samurai suit and I wish I’d thrown the whole thing down the stairs.”

“Everything is going to change,” Tėtis promised, and Michelle did not believe him.

“Everything already changed!” She yelled. “You can’t have Dr. Bloom, you *can’t*. I don’t want her here, and I’ll throw everything we have down the stairs if you bring her here. I hate her, I hate her, and I hate your stuff and I hate *you*- “

“Michelle!”

Tėtis's voice snapped through her, too loud, too stern. His face had gone narrow, closed-off and displeased. Michelle withered under that gaze.

"Dr. Bloom served a purpose," He said slowly, "A purpose I may need her for again. But she does not and *cannot* replace Will. Will belongs here, with us, and I will bring him back to us one day. But I need you to trust me first."

"Oh," Michelle said, soft, uncertain. Of course it was a plan, a game. A fake truth to protect the real truth. But it still sat uneasy in her stomach. "Oh."

"But," Tėtis said, and his voice when very stern, "*You* do not get to force my hand when something happens that you don't like. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Tėtis," Michelle mumbled.

"I won't have this conversation with you again, Michelle."

Michelle turned her face away. "I'm hungry," She mumbled. Tėtis sighed.

"Well, before we eat, there's still the matter of the mess in the hallway."

Everything was falling neatly into place. Somewhere, Jack's little group was digging deeper into the trail of breadcrumbs Hannibal had left them.

Here, in the dining room, Michelle and Abel Gideon were staring each other down.

"Do you frequently invite your daughter to dine with murderers?" Gideon mused. Michelle bristled, straightening up in her seat.

"We invited *you*," She protested. "Not me. I live here." She turned to Hannibal with a pout. "Tėtis! Tell him he's a guest."

"She does have a point," Hannibal mused, laying the tray out. Michelle brightened at the sight of clay leaves and flowers. "And we should be polite to our guests, shouldn't we Michelle?"

Michelle flushed, but only for a moment. There was too much excitement for her to properly behave. Hannibal was unsure if she'd put two and two together for their previous meals, but she'd been pushing to participate more, and she was well aware of what had gone into this feast. It flooded her with a raw excitement that was dizzying to watch, and a nervousness that was flooding the room with its scent. "Sorry, Mr. Gideon," She mumbled, but then the eager rush overtook her again. She jabbed a finger against the cooling clay, grinning at Gideon as she pointed out a lopsided, clumsy daisy. "I made *that* one." She said proudly.

"It's lovely," Gideon assured her, with a sort of amused fascination. He glanced from Michelle to Hannibal. "Apples and trees, I suppose?"

“Of course,” Hannibal agreed cheerfully. He was in a good mood tonight. He would have a fresh meal in his stomach and soon, the dinner table would have more pleasant company. He picked up the hammer and paused for a second, two.

“Can I do it?” Right on cue, Michelle climbed up onto her knees and leaned over the table, making grabbing motions towards the hammer.

“Of course,” Hannibal said again, “But perhaps you could do so as an adult would?”

Michelle flushed again, scrambling down from her seat and around the table. She skirted Gideon as she did it, no longer afraid of him now that he’d been hobbled, now that Will was not shivering and suffering across the room.

Michelle was overeager in this as she was in everything, but it was worth it for the wince that flickered across Gideon’s face as she smashed the hammer down. The clay shattered, releasing the delicious scent into the room. Michelle frowned, leaning forward to sniff at the opening she’d made.

“It doesn’t *smell* like leg,” She complained. Gideon let out a strange, slightly strangled laugh.

“What,” he muttered, once he’d regained his composure, “What exactly does ‘leg’ smell like.”

Michelle frowned and thought it over as Hannibal served up their portions. “I dunno. Not that.” She took her seat again, and for a moment, she and Gideon were lost in the same hesitation, staring at their plates. Hannibal would not be at all disappointed if she chose not to partake, but there was no reason to say anything that might sway her decision. He had no such compunctions of his own and took a bite while he watched his companions debate with themselves.

It was delicious, as he’d known it would be. Perfect, despite Michelle’s little mishap with the salt grinder. Beside him, Gideon poked distrustfully at the meat.

“How does one politely refuse a dish in circumstances such as these?”

“One doesn’t.” It came from Michelle, surprisingly, though she too was merely staring at her food. She said it with such firm conviction, however, that Hannibal gave her a pleased little smile. Her temper lately had left much to be desired, but it seemed not all that Hannibal tried to impart had left her.

“Well, if the lady of the house insists,” Gideon drawled. It still took him another long moment. His hand was slow as it lifted the fork, and when he took the bite, he did it with bated breath and closed eyes.

Hannibal and Michelle both watched, intent.

“Delicious,” Gideon finally said, with a peak towards Michelle.

Michelle burst into a fit of giggles. “Yuck,” She said, stifling it into her hand as if that might mitigate the rudeness. When Hannibal turned to her, one eyebrow raised, she was helpless to

her laughter once more.

“That’s his *leg*,” She explained, as if Hannibal had not guided her through preparing it. “He ate his *leg*.”

“He did,” Hannibal agreed, “As did I.”

“Yeah, but that’s different. It’s not *your* leg. It’s just meat.”

Hannibal watched her closely, the light that danced in her eyes, the confused but eager mirth that radiated from her. A little prodding, surely, would be acceptable. “It’s not yours either,” He reminded her. She looked down at her plate, as if surprised to see it there.

“It’s not,” She said, soft, a little shy. And then she took a bite.

The phone rang in between appointments. Hannibal saw the name and answered it with a smile and a measure of concern pressed carefully into his words. “Hello, Alana?”

A pause, a breath. A broken little sob.

“Will is coming home.”

Chapter End Notes

Fucking *finally.* He's out of prison! Back to murder family shenanigans.

I don't have much to say this time around because I was incredibly frustrated with these idiots and Hannibal in particular. He insisted on being mad at Will despite knowing that Will didn't send Matthew Brown after him, and I just wanted him to shut up.

But it's okay! Stuff is coming! Hannigram interaction! Shelly seeing Will again without bars!

Shelly having an absolute tantrum is my favorite thing. And she technically got away with it because Hannibal figured it was out of character enough that he could just tell her to stop. Hannibal is digging himself a hole because Shelly has been steadily escalating through this whole series.

But somebody threw a vase at Hannibal's head for the Hannibloom fiasco, so I am happy.

ugh idk these aren't my usual rambles. I'm not feeling the rambles today. But if you have any questions, ask away!

Tumblr imploded since we last spoke, so feel free to follow me on Twitter, where I will continue to answer questions and post progress updates.

APRIL FOOLS

Chapter Notes

> This chapter was originally uploaded on 4/1/19 as part of the April Fool's Fic Swap, linked in the end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Michelle was vibrating in her seat as the Bentley pulled into the spot. She had waited a lifetime for this moment, or eight months, which honestly still felt like a lifetime.

Her Will was finally coming home. Slowly, piece by piece her family was finally coming back together. Tėtis said he had a plan, but she hated his plan. Any plan that involved denying her her Will was a terrible plan, and she was determined to keep Will this time.

The room was empty when they entered. It was dim, and cold, and she shifted uncomfortably by tėtis's side. This was taking entirely too long. When tėtis picked her up from school and told her they were going to bring Will home today, she had imagined a much warmer scene. A touching reunion like in the movies. One where Will was be waiting for them outside, arms wide open for her to fall into. She didn't like this waiting. It made her feel as if this was yet another lie, that they would pull Will away from her again.

When the doors across the empty hall finally screeched open, it took every ounce of willpower within her little body to not run across the room and throw herself at Will. The already firm hold tėtis had on her hand tightened when Will finally stepped across the threshold, and she could hear his sharp intake of breath.

Will was as beautiful as ever, and the smile he flashed her made her stomach flip and her heart flutter. It also made the thought of tėtis with Dr. Bloom all the more bitter. It doesn't matter if it was part of a plan, a game. A fake truth to hide the real truth in tėtis's crazy world. At the end of the day Will Graham was infinitely more beautiful than Dr. Bloom and why anyone would choose her over him made her brain hurt.

Tėtis let go of her hand when Will approached them, and Michelle, finally freed, closed the distance and threw herself on him before tėtis had a chance recapture her.

Will's embrace was everything she had dreamed it would be and more. It felt like coming home, and her eyes stung with tears as he held her with the same intensity in which she clung to him.

"I've missed you, sweetheart."

"Never go away again," she whimpered against him, "Tėtis makes bad choices when you're not home. Like invite Dr. Bloom over for sleepovers without asking me."

“Never again,” Will assured her, smoothing down her hair, “I promise.”

“Good. Because I hate her and her stupid face and the way she wore tėtis’s shirt.”

Will’s body tensed against her. His heartbeat quickened and she couldn’t tell he was displeased or excited. Just in case he was upset, she wrapped her body more securely around him, locking her legs around his waist and burying her face into the crook of his neck.

Will smelled of sugar and spice, and everything nice, but something was wrong. He smelled different. He didn’t smell like *her* Will. He was missing the smell of the woods, of fish and motor oil, of *dogs.* Of course he didn’t smell of dogs. How could he? Dr. Bloom had the dogs now. Dr. Bloom and her stupid face with her stupid voice and her stupid clothes.

“I hate her, I hate her, I hate her.”

“Don’t worry, sweetheart, we can have our own sleepover. Just the two of us. And we'll eat mac and cheese and go fishing and roll around with the dogs, and have hot chocolate under the stars.”

Michelle stilled, clinging tighter against him as she rubbed her face against him, nodding furiously. “Yes, please. Just the two of us. No tėtis. No Dr. Bloom.”

“Just the two of us,” Will repeated, pressing a kiss to her hair. “I promise.”

———

Hannibal stood back and watched the happy reunion of the two people who held his heart in their hands. Never again, he promised himself. Never again would he tear this family apart.

For the first time since Will’s incarceration Michelle finally looked at peace. Nestled in his arms, as if she had been crafted to fit there. It was almost painful to know that she had been at war with the world for all these months, but he had to do what was necessary to secure their future together. Even though this choice of his had almost cost him everything. His life, his daughter, his Will.

The board is set now though. His Queen is back and the pawns are all in place. It should have been an easy checkmate, but unfortunately he could never entirely predict Michelle. He could love and nurture, train and guide her. Feed her and whisper through the chrysalis, but what hatched followed its own nature and was beyond him.

He could not control her actions or what spilled from her mouth any more than he could control the trajectory of a typhoon. His Michelle was a force of her own and a wonder to behold.

The corners of his mouth ticked upwards into a subtle grin, pride swelling in his heart. His beautiful Michelle, inadvertently fanning the flames which would draw his beloved Will back to him.

Hannibal drank in the glare Will leveled at him as he passed. Basked in the fire burning in Will's eyes. A fire he knew could only be extinguished by blood. A shiver ran down his spine

as he considered the possibilities.

“Tėtis, tėtis,” Michelle said, head inclined toward him, while her little body wrapped securely around beloved Will. “Will and I are going to have a sleepover. We're going to play with the dogs and then he's going to show me all the stars, and teach me how to wayfind. You are not invited.”

Hannibal smiled and tucked a strand of stray hair back behind her ear, “Is that right?”

“Yes,” Michelle nodded enthusiastically, dislodging her hair again. “We must leave now, though. Wolf Trap is very far away.”

“Indeed it is.” Hannibal glanced over at Will, smiling warmly, only to be pointedly ignored. With one final glare, Will brushed by him and exited the room, Michelle giggling in his arms as the door slammed shut behind them.

———

Michelle was giddy, grinning madly as she clamored into the car. Will had opted to take the spot next to her, and not the one in front with tėtis, like adults normally do. It made Michelle feel important, but it also meant that Will liked her more than tėtis. It made sense though, because right now, she too liked Will more than she liked tėtis.

Tėtis was being a big stupid head and making all the wrong choices. Michelle hated his choices. He shouldn't be allowed to make choices when they result in Will find to prison. And Abigail losing an ear. And hiding Miss Beverly away. And having sleepovers with Dr. Bloom. They were stupid choices. They should have just asked Will to stay. Will was supposed to stay. Will ease supposed to be her other daddy.

Clicking the seatbelt in place, Michelle took a deep breath. It's going to be okay. Will is coming home now. She gets to have a sleepover with him. They get to eat mac and cheese and have hot chocolate as they watched the stars. Everything was going to be okay again.

“You know, dear Will,” tėtis said glancing over his shoulder at Will, shifting the car into reverse. “It's Thursday, you can't just whisk Michelle off to Wolf trap, she has school tomorrow.”

The smile fell from Michelle's face and she scowled at tėtis, but Will took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

“You know what, sweetheart,” Will said petting a hand through her hair, “your tėtis is right, we can't go right away, because you do have school tomorrow, and school is very important. But,” he added quickly before her displeasure bubbled up to the surface, “your tėtis will drop you off tomorrow, right after school. He'll make sure his schedule is clear to ensure that you'll get there by five.”

"And he's not going to stay is he?"

"No, of course not, it'll be just you and me. All weekend. And if he's not there by five, I'll come straight away to get you. Then we'll fly away somewhere just the two of us until we feel like coming home again."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

———

Will pulled up to a dark and empty house. A far cry from the welcoming beacon of light it used to be. For so long, all he wanted was to be home. To be freed of Hannibal and all the emotions associated with that man. But try as he might, he still wanted him. Wanted to be at home with him. To be wrapped up in a man who was both the source of his insanity and clarity. To be surrounded by warmth, and love, and *family.*

He could deny it to the world, to himself, but he loved that man. He loved every part of that man, even the manipulative, cannibalistic, serial killing side.

Hannibal was terrible for him. He was dangerous. Deadly. A cancer that was certainly killing him, but they were conjoined now. Their cells have merged and there was no separating them. Being apart from him made him ache. Ache for his words, his touch, his smell, his taste.

Pouring himself half a glass of whiskey, Will sank into his chair. Mourning the life he used to have. The life he had built for himself. His quiet, lonely existence, filled with the warmth of his seven dogs. That life doesn't belong to him anymore. That life will never again be enough.

Will wanted his dogs. He wanted to pretend for a night that nothing had changed, but Alana was busy, and couldn't come by until tomorrow. Instead Will settled down in his chair, a glass of whiskey in hand and a lifetime of regret.

If he could, he would go back in time. Rewind a year or two, refuse to see Doctor Lecter, turn down Jack's offer to borrow his imagination. He could still be whole. Empty, but whole.

He would never have know the love of a child. The the satisfaction of being full. The thrill of the kill. He would never know what it felt like to be loved unconditionally. To be taken apart piece by piece by skilled hands and an even sharper mind. The rush of power he felt when a life fades by his hands.

Downing the rest of his drink, he put his head back and closed his eyes. He let the stream flood his mind and tried to forget everything.

———

Will was staring into a mug of lukewarm coffee when he heard the car pull up. It was three minutes to five and he couldn't help but wonder if it was because Hannibal had taken his threat to heart or if it was the designs of a very persuasive eight year old. It was most likely the latter, although he wouldn't be surprised if Hannibal was wary of his threat. He would

have done it, and Hannibal, well Hannibal would have allowed it. He knew he couldn't really have though. Not without Hannibal. Never without Hannibal, and he had a feeling the man also knew that.

Knocking back the rest of his coffee, Will waited in his chair, prolonging the inevitable as he heard the car door slam shut. He made no effort to move as he heard Michelle's excited chittering and Hannibal's quiet remarks just outside the window. He settled the mug down as the shuffling of feet came to a stop and the sharp rapt of Hannibal's knuckles against his door reverberated around the room. Scrubbing his hands across his face and waited for the cacophony of barks that would not come, because his dogs were not there.

When the second knock came, a staccato of frenzied fists hitting the door, Will finally stood up. Steeling his nerves, he pulled the door open and immediately dropped his gaze to Michelle.

"Hello gorgeous," he said with a warm smile, taking her weekend bag from Hannibal's hands as she rushed forward to embrace him. "Go say goodbye to your tėtis, he has a long drive ahead of him, and should probably leave as soon as possible if he wants to avoid the bulk of the traffic. But I think he'll be screwed either way."

Michelle released him immediately and directed her attention to Hannibal. He could hear Hannibal's soft huff as he straighten out, undoubtedly directed toward him before addressing Michelle. He was annoyed that Hannibal had expected anything else. After everything that man has put him through over the past eight months. It was laughable that Hannibal expected him to just forgive him, to act as if nothing has changed between them.

The second Michelle released Hannibal, Will ushered her into the house, quickly closing the door behind him before Hannibal could get a word in. Grinning maniacally to himself, he pictured look of affront Hannibal must still be wearing. Suits him right, that bastard.

Will was acutely aware of the fact that Hannibal stood there, staring at them through the window as tossed Michelle's bag onto a chair and he picked up her, spinning her around. It satisfied him immensely to know that he had just effectively slammed the door on the face of a cannibalistic serial killer known to abhorred rudeness. Then again, what was Hannibal going to do? Eat him? Will would like to see him try.

"Will, Will," Michelle giggled from his arms, pulling him from his thoughts. "I have been practicing on the harpsichord with tėtis, wanna hear what I can do?"

"I'd love to, sweetheart," he said, registering the purr of the Bentley's engine come to life.

———

Michelle struck the keys again, harder, louder. The room was too quiet, too still. So she played as loud as she could to drown out the silence, the absence of the dogs. The dogs who were with Dr. Bloom. The dogs who should have been *here,* or at the very least at home with tėtis.

Michelle started the song again, attempting to hold her hands the way Will had shown her, but her fingers tripped over each other and she went back to playing with two fingers. Will wouldn't mind, not that he could see anyway. He was busy preparing the chicken. They were going to have mac and cheese, chicken, and broccoli, tonight. Will was even going to let her microwave the mac and cheese herself. He told her that this was the good stuff. Much better than the box stuff and not pretentious like tėtis's fancy mac and cheese. Michelle was just glad that they were having mac and cheese.

Michelle smiled as she stretched her hand wide, in an attempt to bridge the two octaves, to bring her back to *do* . Michelle found that she enjoyed playing for Will, mainly because it was nothing like playing for tėtis. Playing for Will was fun, not boring and tedious. Will didn't care that her hands weren't in the right positions, or that she would miss notes and mess up the tempo. Will just smiled and assured her that she was doing a great job and that she sounded wonderful.

When she was done showing him her repertoire, Will had taken over the keyboard and showed her how to play a couple of bars of Do-re-mi. Michelle liked the way Will taught. He sang the notes as he played them, and she really liked the way he sang. After a few rounds, Will had to excuse himself to start dinner, so Michelle kept practicing. She had just gotten up to Fa- a long, long way to run, when there was a knock at the door.

" *Shhhhi-"* Will hissed from the kitchen. "Michelle, sweetheart, could you get the door, I'll be right there."

Slipping off the bench Michelle eyed the door suspiciously. Who could Will have invited to their weekend alone? Just the two of us, meant just the two of them. Nobody else. Will had promised. Squinting at the window, Michelle caught a flash of Dr. Bloom's dark hair and blue coat, leapt to her feet.

"You're not welcome here!" Michelle screamed, ripping open the door, stamping her foot for good measure because tėtis wasn't there to reprimand her. "Will is *mine.* You can't have him too, so just run back to tėtis and his stupid parties and boring sleepovers! Will promised it would be just the two of us this weekend so, GO AWAY!"

"I'm sorry to hear that," Dr. Bloom said with a smile that made Michelle want to throw up in her mouth, "Would it be okay if I just let the d-"

"Buster!" Michelle squealed excitedly, as the little Jack Russell pushed his way in through Dr. Bloom's legs. Anger forgotten, Michelle dropped to her knees and was lost to a flurry of limbs and doggy kisses.

Michelle giggled happily as the dogs swarmed her. Each and every one as excited to greet her as she was to see them. Her smile widened even more when she pretended they were at home. In the circle room with all the expensive rugs. Dog hair embedded in *all* of tėtis's things.

———

In all honesty, Will should have been prepared for Alana. He knew she was coming over. She had said so last night. In reality, he was woefully unprepared to see her. He was excited to see

his dogs again though. He missed his dogs. Like he missed Michelle. Like he pretended not to miss Hannibal. Alana though, he could probably have gone with never seeing her again, ever.

Wiping his hands on the kitchen towel he took a deep breath and stepped out into the living room. The quiet stillness of the space was now overrun by a cacophony of dogs, all barking excitedly and climbing all over Michelle. Winston's head snapped up the moment Will crossed the threshold, he looked between Will and Michelle, pressing his nose into her hair before trotting over to Will. And just like that, Will found himself suddenly engulfed by his pack, surrounded by their unbridled joy.

"Thank you for taking care of them," he said, glancing up at Alana, his voice shaking and hands buried in fur.

"Of course," she replied, taking a step forward, a reassuring smile plastered on her face. "It would have been ridiculous to have Hannibal take in your whole pack."

Will turned away from her, fighting back a growl as he refocused his attention back onto his dogs. Who the fuck did she think she was? To even insinuate that Hannibal would not have jumped at the opportunity to take care of his pack. That Hannibal didn't at the very least owe him that much. How dare she imply that *she* cared *more* than his own fucking asshat of a boyfriend.

"Tėtis would have taken care of the dogs," Michelle supplied from the floor, Buster still sprawled on top of her. Will's heart swelled with pride. At least someone was still in his corner. "You just offered to take them before he had a chance to make arrangements."

Yeah, what she said. Will wanted to retort, but didn't because he was an adult. And as such, he opted instead to simply pretend she wasn't there. It was a good tactic. It had worked splendidly so far with Hannibal.

The dogs approved of his plan, lavishing him kisses and wet noses. And as angry as he was, Will found himself smiling, drinking in the unconditional love and attention his dogs bestowed upon him.

Running his hands through unfamiliar fur, he paused, taking in the new dog. "Hello there, pretty girl," he said giving the dog a loving scratch under her chin. "Who are you?"

"She," Alana said, dropping down next to him to give the dog an affectionate pat before affixing a lead to her collar, "is Applesauce. Because she likes applesauce. She's mine, I rescued her."

Applesauce woofed happily as the lead was attached, pulling out of Will's hands and toward the door, dragging Alana along. Following her lead, Will came to a stand and pulled open the door, stepping aside as the dogs all streamed out, with the exception of Winston who sat vigilantly by Michelle's side.

"So," he said acidically, closing the door firmly behind them. "I hear you had a sleepover with Hannibal."

Alana froze. Every muscle in her body tensing as she turned to face him. He could see the guilt written on every line of her face, but it did nothing to abate his anger.

“I'm sorry, Will.”

Fuck you. He wanted to scream, but once again, he was a fucking adult and could handle this conversation as such. “Are you though?” He asked instead. “Because it looks to me that you saw an opportunity to fuck my boyfriend and took it.”

“I… I didn't,” she stammered, mouth snapping shut abruptly when Will leveled her with a glare.

“Don't lie to me, Alana.”

“It just happened. We were both mourning you, Will.”

“Somehow, I highly doubt that.”

Hannibal was a manipulative asshole. Hannibal killed and ate people. Hannibal framed him for murders and had him committed into the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, but Hannibal would *never* choose Alana over him. Ever. Of this he was sure. Especially under his roof, in *their* bed, with Michelle down the hall.

“I'm sorry, Will,” she tried again, blinking back tears, and the urge to slap her itched in his palms. “We were drunk, and there was the pressure of the dinner party, and… things just happened.”

“Cut the fucking bullshit, Alana,” Will hissed behind clenched teeth, nails biting so hard into his palms he could feel his skin threatening to break. “Hannibal is many things, but I do not for a second believe that he would be so out of control, at his own fucking dinner party that *things just fucking happened.”*

“No, no, you're right.” Alana wiped furiously at the tears now streaming down her face. Applesauce pressed close against her legs, and for a split second Will felt sorry for her. “I just, he just…”

Her tears set him over the edge, and any amount of control he had left flew out the proverbial window. Fuck being an adult about this. “You just what? Tripped and fell on his cock?”

“WILL!” Alana screeched, and had the audacity to look offended. “It wasn't like that! We didn't...”

“Oh but you wanted to,” he snarled, letting the anger take over. “We were together, Alana. And *you,* you don't even have excuse of *not knowing.”*

Alana dropped her head in shame. “I honestly didn't think you were ever getting out.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Alana.”

“It's not like that, Will. The odds were against you! You… you…”

“I what, Alana?”

“You tried to *kill* Hannibal.”

“I *WHAT!?”* Will screamed seeing red. If Michelle had not been inside with the dogs, Will was pretty sure he would have broken her pretty little neck and laid her body out for Hannibal to butcher. Alas, Michelle was in the house, and Will was still adult enough to not act upon his primal urges. “Get off my fucking property.”

“Will, please,” she begged.

“You *just* insinuated that you believed that I was some serial killer, mentally unstable enough to be locked away at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally insane indefinitely. *And* that I’m fucked up enough to send someone to kill *my boyfriend* while my *daughter* was in the fucking house.” Will took a step forward and Alana was at least smart enough to instinctively flinch back. “Get the fuck off my property if you know what's good for you.”

———

Michelle scrambled down from the table by the window when she saw Dr. Bloom storm off toward her car, Applesauce close at her heels. Will continued to stand there for a moment, watching her leave, and when he turned toward the house even she could see that he was angry. And honestly, he had every right to be. Dr. Bloom had tried to insert herself into tėtis's life and take his place. Unforgivable.

“Can we eat her leg?” Michelle asked the moment Will slammed the door shut.

“Excuse me?”

Will looked confused. And aggravated. Michelle didn’t understand why. Her request was quite reasonable. “Dr. Bloom,” she said clarified, “can we eat her leg?”

“There will be no leg eating, Missy,” Will said running a hand through his hair before dropping down into a chair. He exhaled slowly and pulled her onto his lap.

“But she kissed tėtis!” Michelle protested, squirming to break free, only to have Will tighten his arms around her. “And she’s not allowed to kiss tėtis! Tėtis is *yours!* ”

Will huffed out a laugh and pressed a kiss to her head. “Fine, we can eat her pancreas.”

Michelle made a face. She didn't like pancreas. She's not sure she's had pancreas, but if it's anything like heart or liver or lung, she's sure she's not going to like it.

“I don't like pancreas. Leg tastes better.”

Will stiffened. A series of emotions washed across his face, too quickly for her to register any of them. "Michelle, honey, what do you mean leg tastes better than pancreas?”

Michelle shrugged, picking at the hem of her sweater. "You would think leg would taste funny, like leg or something, but it really just tastes like pork. Pancreas on the other hand,

would most likely taste like offal. And I don't like the taste of offal, no matter where it comes from."

"You've eaten leg?"

"Yes, I just said that."

"A *human* leg?"

Michelle didn't know where Will was going with his questions. They didn't make a lot of sense. "Well not a whole leg, that would be crazy."

"But a part of a *human* leg."

"Yes?"

"And where did this leg come from?"

"The man in the basement. But it's okay!" Michelle added quickly when Will frowned. "He ate it too. And it was really good. Tėtis baked it in clay, and I got to help decorate it. He even let me break the clay when it was ready."

Will took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose. Michelle wondered if she said something wrong.

"What man in the basement?"

Michelle could hear the exasperation in Will's voice. It made her nervous. "The scary one who I said wasn't there."

The moment the words finished leaving her mouth Michelle *knew* she had said something terribly wrong this time. Will's face contorted into the expression she hated most. Her chest tightened up as the disappointment continued to wash over Will.

A broken sob escaped her when Will's arms fell to his side, tears falling heavily from her eyes. She messed up, and now everything was wrong. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong.

Will hated her now, because he knew she lied to him. Tėtis chose Dr. Bloom over Will, even if it was just for pretend. Her Nina was still dead and Abigail was so far away, hiding away at the cliff house. Her perfect family, which she had painstakingly pieced together was now falling apart and it was all her fault.

———

"Oh, no, no, no," Will said pulling Michelle tight against him, wiping the tears from her eyes. "I'm not angry with you, sweetheart. Never with you. That tėtis of yours though, I'm going to have to have a long conversation with him."

"Don't be mad at tėtis," Michelle hiccuped. "He said he had a plan. It's probably a stupid plan, but it's tėtis's plan, and tėtis's plans always work out in the end."

“I’m sure they do,” Will assured her. “I’m still going to have a long talk with your tėtis though. Especially regarding the feeding you of people.”

Michelle nodded enthusiastically against him, wiping her face on his shirt. “Yes please. He’s been feeding the snails that man’s leg too. And I just know he intends to make me eat the snails. I don't want to eat snails!”

“You don't have to eat anything you don't want to, sweetheart.”

“That's not what tėtis says.”

“Well, you *should* listen to your tėtis, but I think in this particular matter, you don’t have to eat anything you don’t want to.”

“Good. Because I don't want to eat snails.”

“No snails for you, baby.” Will smiled tightly and smoothed down her hair. “Your tėtis is a ridiculous man.”

“Yea, but you love him anyway, right?”

“I…” Will stammered. The question blindsided him. He had spent the past eight months hating Hannibal. Suddenly he was dragged back into the woods. Onto a lonely highway in the pouring rain. Drenched and shivering against Hannibal's chest, sheltered from the storm.

Will squeezed his eyes shut, shaking his head as he clutched Michelle against him. He tried to push the memory from his mind, of lost time and gentle hands.

No.

Hannibal was wrong for him. Hannibal was manipulative and deceiving. Hannibal was a serial killer and a cannibal. Hannibal was love and utter devotion. Hannibal was what every fiber of his being cried out for. Hannibal was that ache in his heart, that feeling of completeness, because he *loved* him.

“Yeah,” he choked out, dropping his head against her shoulder. “I suppose I do.”

“He loves you too, you know,” Michelle said running little fingers through his hair. “He said so to Dr. Bloom.”

“Did he now?”

“Yeah.”

They fell silent for a moment. Allowing the weight of those words to wash over them. The dogs were settled contently in their beds, with only Winston pressed against them, ever diligent with his protection.

Will sighed and tried not to think of Hannibal. Of all the ways he had wrong him, and of all the ways he had attempted to set things right. Oh, how Will hated him, hated him just about

as much as he loved him.

Michelle shifted in his arms, wiped at the tears streaming down his face and gave him a small smile. “Can we eat now? I’m hungry.”

“Yeah, sure, kiddo. No legs though.”

“No legs. Just chicken. And mac and cheese.”

“And broccoli.”

———

Michelle pulled the blanket tighter around her and scootched back so her back rested against the lip of the window. She smiled, imagining the face tėtis would surely make if he knew Will told her to climb onto the roof to watch the stars. She found that she liked being up here on the roof. High above the world. It made her feel big. And powerful. Like she was towering over the world.

“The stars are brighter out here.”

Will hummed in agreement. “Less light pollution,” he said passing her a mug of hot chocolate. “And we’re higher off the ground.”

“I like it.”

“I thought you would.”

The hot chocolate was the overly sweet kind. The kind that comes in little packets that you add hot water to. The kind that tėtis never lets her drink. Michelle smiled into her drink. Will was the best. He did all thing things tėtis hated.

“Do you see that star right there?” Will asked, pointing up at the sky. Michelle wasn’t exactly sure which star he was pointing at, as there were thousands, possibly millions, but she nodded anyway. “That’s Sirius, the dog star. It’s the brightest star in the night sky.”

“Why’s it called the dog star?”

“Mainly due to its placement within the constellation, Canis Major.”

“The great dog?”

“Yup, the great dog. In Greek Mythology, Canis Major represented the dog Laelaps, a gift from Zeus to Europa. It’s sometimes the hound of Procris, Diana’s nymph, or the one given by Aurora to Cephalus, so famed for its speed that Zeus elevated it to the sky.”

“Are all the constellations based in Greek Mythology?”

“A lot of them, yeah. Like Orion, which is right there,” Will said gesturing toward a patch of stars, “named after well, Orion, a hunter in Greek Mythology. Canis Major was also

considered to represent one of Orion's hunting dogs."

"How do people tell the constellations apart? They all just look like a bunch of dots in the sky."

"Well you see Sirius right?"

Michelle squinted at the sky. She supposed there was one star that was brighter than the rest. "Yeah?"

"To the left of it, do you see those three bright stars that are almost in a row?"

"Yes! Yes I do!"

"Well that, sweetheart, is Orion's belt. If you look to the North of it, you should see a large orange star, that's Betelgeuse, a massive red supergiant, it is the right shoulder to Orion."

Michelle tried to follow Will's descriptions of the stars, but after a while her eyes started to get all crossed and everything blurred into one. Letting out a yawn she cradled the now empty mug close and dropped her head onto Will's shoulder.

"Can we go to the cliff house tomorrow?" She asked sleepily.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart, but what cliff house?"

"You know, the cliff house," Michelle said waving her hands vaguely. "The one on the cliff, overlooking the Chesapeake Bay. Big windows, precarious cliff."

"Sounds lovely, unfortunately your tėtis has never taken me there, so I don't know where it is."

"Oh he should. We should ask him, tomorrow." Putting the mug aside, Michelle burrowed against Will, chasing his warmth. "Abigail is probably lonely there, taking care of Miss Beverly all alone."

"Oh?"

Michelle nodded against him, eyes slipping closed. "Yeah, and it's not like Miss Beverly is very good company right now, either. She just sleeps most of the time."

"Fucking Hannibal," Will muttered under his breath. If Michelle had been more awake she would have giggled and said 'language,' the way tėtis does. If Michelle had been more awake she would have told Will that the word fuck was crass and tėtis disapproves if it's usually, and therefore he should use it more often. But she was too sleepy for jokes and Will was so warm and comfortable against her.

———

Hannibal was just about to prepare lunch when he noticed Will's car pulling into the driveway. Changing his trajectory, he relocated to the foyer and watched as Michelle hopped

out of the car and made her way around to the front, practically climbing into Will's lap when he opened the door for her. Will held her close, speaking softly to her as she nodded along enthusiastically. It was a touching scene, one that Hannibal would have appreciated more if he hadn't been preoccupied with the question of, what were they doing here?

During the drive down to Wolf Trap, Michelle had insisted that she be allowed to spend the maximum amount of time with Will. She would not relent until he finally conceded that she be allowed to forgo her harpsichord lessons and return in time for supper. The fact that they are currently six hours ahead of schedule was quite curious, and undoubtedly by Michelle's design.

When Will finally released her, Hannibal moved to pull open the door. For a second, his eyes locked with Will's, his heart fluttering as he was met with a smug defiance. Hannibal smiled, shifting his attention toward Michelle who was now approaching the house in quick, purposeful strides, the weekend bag slung over her shoulder slapping angrily against her legs.

"Good morning, tėtis," Michelle said hurriedly, pushing past him and into the house. She paused for a moment to toe off her shoes before disappearing up the stairs, all before Hannibal could get in a greeting.

Hannibal stared after her for a moment, baffled by her behavior. Michelle knew better than to behave so rudely, even if she was still harboring unsavory feelings over his most recent choices. Glancing back toward Will and the car he as currently idling in, his confusion shifted into suspicion when Will flashed him a toothy grin.

"Come, tėtis, we have to go," Michelle said pressing his coat and gloves into his hand. "Will's waiting in the car."

"So I can see," Hannibal said, entertaining her as he pulled on his coat and slipped his feet into the shoes she had subsequently placed at his feet. "And where is it that we shall be journeying to, little one?"

"The cliff house," Michelle chripped happily beside him. "Will didn't know how to get there, so he suggested we come pick you up so we could all go together."

Hannibal stilled, sucking at his teeth in annoyance as he shifted his gaze back to Will, who was now openly laughing. He would have to have long talk with Michelle about keeping secrets again, but for now, he could indulge her this.

———

Will took a deep breath in a vain attempt to calm his rabbiting heart. This was a terrible idea. He shouldn't be here. He should be home, with his dogs, getting covered in dog hair. But instead he had gotten a haircut and had his beard trimmed, not to mention removed as much dog hair as he possibly could from his clothes and dug out the nice overcoat from the back of his closet.

Folding the traitorous overcoat over his arm, he checked the time again and knocked. Once. Sharply. And then immediately turned around because his goddamn heart was still beating

out of his chest and he can't possibly face Hannibal like this. This was a terrible idea. Will had half a mind to leave, but he couldn't. He needed this. Needed to deal with Hannibal. And his feelings about him. It was best if he did that directly.

The door opened behind him and Will forced himself to turn around slowly. "Hello, Will."

Will regarded Hannibal with a tight smile and a slight tilt of his head. "May I come in?"

"Are you finally acknowledging my presence now?"

"Dr. Lecter," Will drawled, relishing the look of distaste Hannibal wore at being addressed by his title. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Will," Hannibal chastised, and Will had to fight the surge of arousal threatening to pool in his gut. "I believe we were past such formalities."

Will hummed. Brushing by him when Hannibal gestured for him to enter. Everything about the room was exactly as he remembered it, down to the wine glass sitting neatly on the end table next to Hannibal's armchair.

"My apologies, Dr. Lecter," Will said hanging his coat. "Were you expecting someone?"

"Only you."

"Of course you were," Will muttered under house breath, but knew Hannibal heard him regardless.

"So, Will, what brings you here today."

"Why don't you tell me, Dr. Lecter, since you were clearly anticipating my arrival."

"Teacups and time."

Will scoffed. "Oh, that's rich, Dr. Lecter. Funny how easy it is to piece a teacup back together when it was never shattered in the first place."

"No, I suppose it wasn't," Hannibal said, following his path around the room. "It was merely chipped."

"You cut off her fucking ear and shoved it down my throat, Hannibal!" Will screamed, turning to snarl at Hannibal. He was tired of playing games his fucking games. Tired of all the lies.

"An action I regret most deeply."

"Fuck you, Hannibal." Will shoved past him to retrieve the abandoned glass of wine. "Fuck you, and your fuckery. I'm tired of all the lies. Of your fucking face. God, I hate you so fucking much right now."

“A completely reasonable sentiment, considering the circumstances,” Hannibal replied, with a sincerity Will *almost* believed.

“You fucked with my head, Hannibal,” Will spat, tossing back the contents of the glass before setting it back down forcefully. He willed it to topple over and shatter when it wobbled precariously, but alas it settled without incident. “I fucking trusted you, and you *fucked* me instead. And not in the fun way.”

Hannibal sighed heavily before refilling the glass, shifting closer to Will. “Dear Will-”

“No!” Will screamed, flinching back from the hand moving to cup his cheek. He wanted to give in. To give into this man, and his hands, but he couldn't. Not when the feeling of those hands gently cupping his face while they kissed were overlapped with the feeling of those same hands gently cupping his face while a feeding tube was involuntarily shoved down his throat. “Don't fucking call me that.”

The disappointment written on Hannibal's face almost made his heart ache, and Will wanted nothing more than to smooth those lines away. “Will,” he tried again, keeping his distance, hands twitching minutely at his sides, “there are no words in existence that can possibly construe how incredibly sorry I truly am for that.”

“Stop. Just fucking stop.” Will rubbed at his face. He was tempted to drain the new glass of wine, but couldn't allow the alcohol to further cloud his judgement.

“What is it that you would like me to stop, Will? For I will never stop apologizing for the trails I put you through until I have gained back trust and forgiveness.”

“Oh for fuck's sake,” Will groaned, collapsing into the chair. “I don't think I can ever forgive you for what you fucking put me though. Eight months, Hannibal. Eight fucking months.” *Without you. Without Michelle. Thinking Abigail was dead. Thinking Beverly was lost to the ripper.*

“A necessary evil. You were not ready to see us then, Will.”

“Fuck you.” Will glared up at Hannibal. “I wasn't fucking ready to see. Who the fuck are you to determine what I was, *am* , ready or not to see?”

Hannibal met his stare, with a subtle shake of his head. “No, you are right. *I* was the one not ready to allow you see me. I wasn't prepared for the possibility of your rejection of me.”

“So what? You knee jerked and accidentally shoved her ear down my throat?”

“I needed it to be believable, Will. Believe me when I say I would never have done anything to truly compromise your life.”

“Except let my brain fucking cook itself!” Will shook with righteous anger, tears stinging the back of his eyes.

Hannibal had the audacity to look affronted, hands reluctantly held to his side, flexing in an attempt to not reach for Will again. Every miniscule movement, setting Will more and more

on edge. He came in here for a confrontation. He was ready for a fight. And yet. No matter what he said, no matter how many times he spat venom at Hannibal, the fucking bastard just stood there and took it. With what looked like *regret* filling his eyes.

Will couldn't take it anymore, this juxtaposition of love and hate. Of truth and lies. He couldn't bare it if everything had been a lie. If he had been nothing more to Hannibal than merely a pawn.

"I sorely regret not treating your encephalitis with as much care was I should have, I thought I had everything under control. I thought that things would work themselves out the way they always did. My plans have always been fool proof, but then you entered my life, Will. You whom I could never truly predict. You took everything I thought I knew and-"

"Just shut your fucking face and hold me already," Will sobbed, the ache in his bones crying out for Hannibal's touch becoming unbearable. In an instant he was enveloped in warmth and crushed against Hannibal's chest. "I hate you. I fucking hate you so fucking much, you know that?" he mumbled against Hannibal's shoulder, fists wrapping around the lapels of yet another hideous suit, pulling him as close as humanly possible.

"Yes, dear Will," Hannibal said pressing a tender kiss to his hair. "I love you too."

Chapter End Notes

Will effectively spends 6,000 words pretending Hannibal doesn't exist while talking around him. Initially they were supposed to end with Hannibal being railed against his ladder when Will finally acknowledges him, but the chapter got out of hand. That and the whole conversation went a different route.
Michelle is still quite angry at Hannibal and thereby rebelling by revealing all his secrets to Will who she sees and a equal to Hannibal and therefore worthy of knowing.
Hannibal is most displeased with her spilling the beans, but at the same time, he is ecstatic that she holds Will in such high regard.
Hannibal does indeed take Will to the cliff house where he is then reunited with Abigail and they have a long talk about all the things. He gets to see Beverly and witness that she is still in fact alive, but concedes to let Hannibal finish his "therapy" with her so that she doesn't remember what has happened to her.
The last section of this chapter should be entitled "How many times can I get Will to say fuck before Hannibal loses it." And the answer is there is no upper limit because Hannibal understands how angry Will is and is actually apologetic about what he put Will through and will therefore allow him to vent. Like I said, this was supposed to end with Will fucking Hannibal senseless against the ladder, but Will decided to cry instead.
With all that said, April fool's! How far did you get before you realized this wasn't strats or a real chapter? Please let me know how I did!

A note from the real strats: Today's chapter was brought to you by The April Fool's Fic Swap, where this chapter will also be uploaded at some point today. For anyone who is upset, there IS a real chapter coming. It is almost done, and I'd intended to have it ready by today, but I got married on the 16th and am currently on my honeymoon (and running late for our next adventure!), so it didn't wrap up in time. But it's coming! In April! I promise!

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

> The previous chapter was uploaded as part of an April Fool's joke. This is the ACTUAL chapter six. It is very, very late, and you may need to go refresh your memory of chapter 5

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was cloudy when Will was released. Will supposed sunshine had been too much to hope for. Still, the disappointment of clouds could not outweigh the heavy sense of relief. He was out, loose in the world once more. He was going *home*.

“Why didn’t Hannibal just kill you?” Chilton asked him. Will could have thought of a dozen people he would have rather had walk him out, and that was just the inmates, but it was Chilton he was stuck with. At least now, Will no longer felt like he had reason to hide.

“Because he wants to think he loves me,” Will told him, and felt a spike of spiteful glee at the myriad of emotions that crossed Chilton’s face.

“You told me you weren’t sleeping together,” Chilton accused.

Will rolled his eyes. “Actually, I just told you it was unethical for a psychiatrist to sleep with their patient,” He corrected, “But if you check my medical records, you’ll find that Hannibal was never officially my psychiatrist.”

Chilton’s face flickered a few more times before somehow managing to be ‘irritated’ *and* ‘smug’ at the exact same time. Although ‘smug’ appeared so often on Chilton’s face that Will was beginning to wonder if he was stuck that way.

Jack was waiting, when Will came up the steps into the main floor of the hospital. The natural light that filtered in through the windows was gray from the clouds, but it still managed to tempt Will.

“I thought you could use a ride,” Jack offered. Will wanted to deny him. He wanted to spit out that he would call a cab, or *walk* to Virginia, if he had to, rather than sit in a car with a man who had ignored every word out of his mouth.

But he didn’t actually want to walk to Virginia, and cab rides across state lines were rare and expensive. Will sighed and followed Jack to the car.

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In the car, Will leaned against the window, trying to lose himself in the view of trees and houses. The highway stretched before him, seeming infinite as Jack cleared his throat.

“We found Miriam Lass,” He said, “Alive.”

Will startled, straightening up. In all the thousand of thoughts he’d had about Hannibal, never once had it occurred to him that Miriam would be found alive. In all honesty, Will assumed he’d devoured her whole. He had a sneaking suspicion that the sounders of three every couple of years were not the Ripper’s only victims, not if Hannibal was as strict about his diet as Will suspected he was. Those were just the ones he displayed.

But Miriam was alive, and free. A spark of hope lit itself in Will’s chest and was immediately quenched by logistics: If they’d caught Hannibal, even Jack would have begun the conversation with an apology.

“You didn’t catch the Ripper,” Will surmised, turning his gaze back to the scenery.

“No,” Jack admitted, “We found a cabin, Miriam inside. We’re searching for more evidence.”

He wasn’t going to find any. Will was already resigned to that. If they’d found Miriam Lass, it was because Hannibal wanted her found.

“How is she?” Will asked.

“Traumatized,” Jack admitted. He hesitated, a small intake of breath that gave away his reticence. It peaked Will’s curiosity; he peered at Jack from the corner of his eye, his stare disguised by too-long bangs. It took a long moment for Jack to speak again, and when he did, the words were sharp-edged with his audible guilt.

“She thanked me for not giving up on her,” Jack said, “But I did. I gave up on the both of you, her for dead and you for crazy.”

“So, am I not crazy anymore?” Will mused, a low drawl that brought a discontented look to Jack’s face. Jack didn’t answer him.

“I stopped trying to find her,” He said instead, “To find both of you.”

“I wasn’t missing,” Will growled, “You just weren’t listening.”

“I’m listening now,” Jack insisted, “I put Miriam Lass in a room with Hannibal Lecter, she stated definitively that he is *not* the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“And was that good enough for you?”

“No,” Jack said ruefully, “It wasn’t.”

That was enough to startle Will again, although eh kept it hidden. He looked at Jack, properly this time. Jack looked tired, weary. He looked like a man who had seen and done too much. He looked like a man who needed a nap.

A slow smile stretched over Will's face. He leaned back in his seat, relaxing once more. "Where did you find Miriam, Jack?"

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Tėtis had built a cage around the leg, lining it with leafy greens and whatever else snails liked. Michelle didn't think the snails had a bed, though, and that seemed unfair, so she had made one herself. It was a nice shade of electric blue felt, from her craft box, and she'd put glitter on it.

The snails probably didn't *need* a bed, not really, but what Michelle *really* wanted was to go downstairs.

Downstairs was different now than it had been when Miss Beverly stayed with them. For one thing, it had the snail garden now, and for another, it had The Man.

The Man had scared Michelle once, when Will was shaking and seizing in the dining room. He was too happy about everything, smiling when no one had a right to smile. But now, The Man didn't have any legs, and that made him a lot scarier.

The Man was called Dr. Gideon, and he was not like Miss Beverly. He was allowed to roll around the downstairs in his wheelchair, as long as Tėtis was home to make sure he didn't get into mischief. He did not need to be drugged and tied down when Tėtis was home, because without his legs, he couldn't get up the stairs and through the door, not without Tėtis noticing. Even if the door *hadn't* locked from the outside.

Michelle wished Miss Beverly could have been awake when she was here, but she supposed that it was better that Miss Beverly was allowed to keep her legs.

Michelle stood on the very very tippiest of her toes, peering up at the leg in its garden. The snails had started to erode it. It didn't look much like a leg anymore, excepting the toes.

"Wasn't expecting company," A low voice drawled from behind her, "I would have made tea."

Michelle was *not* afraid of Dr. Gideon, not really, not *actually*, but she still didn't like being snuck up on. She whirled around, clutching the felt scraps tight in her hands, and took a step back. Dr. Gideon frowned at her from his wheelchair. He had funny eyes. Bad-Funny, not Laugh-Funny. Michelle straightened up.

"You can't make tea," She said, accusing, "You don't have a stove."

"Fair enough," Dr. Gideon said, "But it's still polite to call ahead, don't you think? What are you doing down here, anyway?"

"I made the snails a bed," Michelle informed him, waving the felt around. A few speckles of glitter shook their way to the floor. She watched them with a bit of fascination. They sparkled in the low lighting.

“Be careful,” Dr. Gideon said, “The glitter might make them sick, and then what will we eat for dinner?”

“Probably your arm,” Michelle said, because that seemed like the next logical step. Dr. Gideon looked down at his hands and started to laugh. It was not a Happy laugh. It was Bad-Funny, like his eyes.

Michelle was not afraid of Dr. Gideon, because she was a big girl, but she edged towards the stairs anyway. It was warmer upstairs, and snails did not sleep in beds.

“An arm, some fingers, a kidney or two. Nothing that daddy of yours won’t eat, is there, kid?”

“Tėtis,” Michelle corrected, automatic, “And you can’t eat bones.”

“You can still cook with them,” Dr. Gideon said dismissively, “Use them for stock. My mother used to make beef soup with the bones, I’m sure your Tėtis could figure it out.”

Bones for stock, marrow for gravies. Michelle knew a dozen recipes they could try out on Dr. Gideon. The thought made her a little better. She hadn’t *really* come to give the snails a bed, after all. She’d come for curiosity.

Feeling a tad bit braver, Michelle took a step towards Dr. Gideon, peeking at him.

He wore soft pajamas, and a thick blanket around his shoulders. Beneath the blanket, though, peeking out from the edge, she could see the thick white bandages.

Dr. Gideon’s legs ended mid-thigh, above the knee. Tėtis changed his bandages a couple of times a day, disappearing into the basement. The newer injury had bled through, just a little bit. Michelle locked onto the red stain, fascinated.

“Did it hurt?” It was a silly question; she knew it was a silly question. But she had to ask.

Dr. Gideon’s eyes narrowed. He yanked the blanket up, extending the stump that had once been a leg. She’d eaten that leg. She’d put it in her mouth and chewed it all up and swallowed and then her digestive system had crunched it all up into energy. That made her stronger than Dr. Gideon, right? Top of the food chain?”

“Like a bitch,” Dr. Gideon growled.

“I don’t know what that means,” Michelle said. She knew it was one of the Bad Words, words you only said if you were capital-R Rude, but she didn’t really understand what it meant in regard to pain. No one she knew used words like that, and certainly not in front of Michelle. “It hurt a lot?”

“Your daddy tied me down and sliced into my skin while I watched,” Dr. Gideon said, tilting his head, “Then he fed me my pound of flesh. How does that make you *feel*?”

“I don’t have a Daddy,” Michelle insisted, because that was the easiest part of that sentence, “I keep telling you I don’t have a Daddy.”

“No, you don’t,” Dr. Gideon agreed, “You have something else entirely. Most children are afraid of the monster under the bed, but here you are, playing house with two of them.”

“There’s no monsters,” Michelle said, voice high and tight, sharp in her throat, “There’s nothing under the bed, Tėtis said.”

“None under the bed,” Dr. Gideon drawled, “But the basement, the basement is another matter entirely.”

Dr. Gideon tilted his head. His eyes were shiny, and for the first time, he looked like the man who had watched Will shake in their dining room. Like the man who’d gone after Dr. Bloom and given her the pink scar across her cheek.

She understood now, what he was saying. Dr. Gideon lived in the basement, and Tėtis came down to the basement to work. But Tėtis…

Whatever Tėtis did in the basement, he was still *Tėtis*. He washed and braided her hair, and tucked her into bed, and made her boxed mac and cheese when things were really, *really* bad. He wasn’t a monster, no matter what Dr. Gideon said, he could not ever ever be a monster. Monsters were bad, they did bad things, but Tėtis never did anything bad to Michelle.

He did something bad to Will, a tiny voice reminded her, *He hurt Will, and Will was still trapped, still hurting*.

But whatever he’d done to Will, Tėtis had only done because he *had* to. And he was going to fix it. He promised. He didn’t hurt people Michelle liked. That’s why Miss Beverly was at the cliff house.

Dr. Gideon, though, Dr. Gideon was a man who did bad things. A man who sliced people open who Michelle actually sort of liked, at least before they went around kissing people they weren’t supposed to. Dr. Bloom needed to back away from Michelle’s family, but she wasn’t rude, or bad, not like the people Tėtis brought into the basement. Not like Dr. Gideon.

By Michelle’s reasoning, which was the only sort that mattered to her, Tėtis was not a monster. But Dr. Gideon *was*. A monster who, even with no legs, was twice the size of Michelle. Michelle took a step back, and looked around for something to throw at him.

“Michelle!” Tėtis stood at the top of the stairs, backlit by the bright lights of the pantry. Dr. Gideon looked at him, then back to Michelle. He smiled, that awkward, too-bright smile.

“Better run, little girl. Daddy’s calling.” And his smile stretched wider and wider across his face, and he was bigger than her, and had torn people apart.

Michelle did not correct him again. She scrambled up the stairs, throwing herself at Tėtis’s legs. Tėtis stared over her head, down the stairs. Then, he locked the door behind her.

———

Theater. *Field Kabuki*. Hannibal really did have a penchant for the dramatic. Will had stood in that cabin, staring down into the cisterns, and seen Hannibal Lecter in every corner.

Jack hadn't. Oh, he was listening now, taking in everything Will said and filing it away into a corner of his mind, something to chew on late at night. But he didn't see what Will saw. And once he found that piece of evidence, that arrow pointing to anyone but Hannibal, he was going to jump on it.

Will wondered who Hannibal was going to frame this time. He had absolved Will, out of some misguided feeling of… possession, maybe? His favorite toy was in someone else's toybox. Chilton had his grubby little fingers all over Will's brain, and Hannibal wanted to pack up his things and go home.

Will was, frankly, a little tired of feeling like everyone's favorite plaything.

Will finally turned up the long drive towards his home, his lighthouse. He'd spent his first night free in some god-awful motel in the middle of nowhere. It had been the best night of sleep he'd had in months. Tonight was surely going to top it.

The front door opened as Will stepped out of the car. The dogs spilled out over the front lawn in a mass of eager tongues and tails. Will dropped to his knees with a gasp and let them wash over him, petting each one in turn. There were more than he remembered, and he raised an eyebrow as he checked the collar of the newest addition.

"That one's mine," Alana said, stepping off the porch to meet him. "Applesauce. She likes applesauce. I rescued her."

"Picking up some of my bad habits?" Will asked, straightening to his feet.

"I like to think of them as your good ones." They stared at each other, two people who no longer knew how to interact, who could no longer recall the slant of a conversation where they were on equal ground.

"You stopped visiting," Will said. Winston nosed at his hand. He pat at the soft fur distractedly.

"You challenged the entire framework of how I perceive you," Alana replied, her voice soft and uncertain, "The way I think you are."

Will took in her stance, the way she stood just out of reach, arms across her chest. "The way you think I am isn't always who I actually am," He said slowly, "People are funny that way."

"I was wrong about you."

And there it was. There was sorrow in her eyes, but not for him. Her gaze lacked the pity and regret Will might have expected. Instead, she carried herself with a defensive anger. It boiled inside her, lacking direction, lacking focus.

Will was not in the mood to assuage anyone else's feelings. He was not sure he would ever manage that mood again.

"Because you didn't believe in me?" He asked, knowing before the flinch that she hadn't meant that at all, "Because you sat across from me, my hands chained to the table, and told

me you knew I'd killed those girls, but it was alright because you *supported* me?" He spat out the last few words with venom aimed to wound. He succeeded. Alana drew her hands tighter around herself and avoided his eyes.

"Because I sat by Hannibal's hospital bed while he recovered from wounds you sent to him."

Will did not flinch. He'd had enough time to adjust to that muddled emotion, the soft flickers of guilt and concern that merged with the regret of a job left unfinished. "I see we're back to the doubt," He growled, "Tell me, is there anything I could tell anybody about myself that they might believe?"

"What is it I'm supposed to believe, Will?"

"I didn't send Matthew Brown to kill Hannibal."

"But he wouldn't have gone, if you hadn't pointed him in Hannibal's direction."

There was a truth to that which even Will could not deny. It was a truth that had echoed in his head since he'd been told of the attack. "Saying it the insulting way, I see," Will told her, just to watch her flinch again. "If you think for one second that I would have sent that man into a home with a defenseless child in it, you need to get the hell off my property."

There was the regret Will had hoped to see when he arrived. Some of Alana's bravado fled her. Her shoulders sank.

"I don't think that," She said quietly, "But, Will, I don't know *what* to think about you anymore."

"Then we're on the same page," Will said flatly. They stared at each other for a long moment. Alana's hands were trembling.

"You've been pointing fingers at Hannibal," She finally said, "Is he safe?" Her eyes flickered away on the last word. They'd been doing that a lot through the entire conversation. Every time she mentioned Hannibal's name, in fact.

The realization dawned upon Will in a bubbling, roaring rage. He felt stupid. He should have seen it coming. Hannibal had thrown the hint in his face, after all.

"From me, or *for* you?" Will hissed, and Alana's flinch was the only answer he needed. He straightened up to his full height. Alana took a step back, as if Will was going to hit her. As if he would *ever*...

"I don't believe this," Will said.

"Will," Alana said weakly. Will's eyes narrowed.

"They were the worst months of my life. I was trapped and alone, and you were out here trying to *fuck my boyfriend?*" Never mind that Will would have loudly announced their breakup to anyone who had thought to ask. Had the bed even been cold yet when Hannibal pulled Alana into it?

It was Hannibal who Will was angry with, to be honest, but he couldn't help the flicker of spite he felt towards Alana. Hannibal was manipulative, and coercive, but she should have known better. She was their *friend*, the only one who they had come forward and explicitly told about their relationship.

"It wasn't like that," Alana protested.

"Really?" Will asked, "What was it like? Is there some other interpretation of you sleeping with Hannibal that I'm missing?"

"We didn't sleep together," Alana said, with another avoidant flicker of her eyes. It was a paltry difference, to Will, who shared intimacy with another person so rarely.

"Whatever you did," Will growled, "Would you have told me about it if I hadn't guessed?"

Alana looked down at the dogs. One of them nosed at her trembling hands. She did not answer. Maybe she didn't know the answer.

"Go home, Alana," Will growled, "And stay away from Hannibal Lecter."

"Will, I'm so sorry-"

"Not for me," Will snapped, "For yourself. Unless you think he had entirely altruistic motives for this little affair? Damn it, Alana, at least you were single. Hannibal had even less excuse than you did."

For some reason, that seemed to rouse Alana's bravery once more. She paused as she passed Will, her hand on the car door.

"Hannibal missed you every second of every day," She said, voice quiet, yet firm. "Any affection he felt for me was borne out of a shared mourning. I was a distraction, Will," Alana's voice broke on a sob, "Someone who could understand him, and didn't try to make him move on. It was less an affair and more a shared suffering."

"Am I supposed to *thank* you?" Will hissed.

"No," Alana told him. "I'm not proud of myself. I have no reason to be. And whatever you feel towards Hannibal, that's your business. But I can't see what you're seeing in him, Will, not when I know what he looks like when you're gone."

Something jerked hard in Will's stomach, something that felt a lot like guilt and hope, locked in a twisted embrace. "Go home, Alana," He growled.

She was staring at him in the rearview mirror, when she left. Will pretended not to notice.

———

Hannibal's last patient of the day had canceled. Hannibal was immeasurably grateful; life had been conspiring to wear him out, lately, and he needed the break. Being a single father of two was difficult, even if one of the children was a largely-self-sufficient teenager. She still

needed guidance, and comfort, and enough groceries to fuel a small army. Growing was tiring business, after all.

And Michelle, sweet Michelle, was growing into her teenage years a bit early. She had always been sneaky, Hannibal had raised her to be, but she had always snuck around within the boundaries Hannibal had set for her. Lately, she'd started to view those boundaries as a challenge. Hannibal had needed to have a little chat with Abel Gideon about spending time with Hannibal's daughter. The kidney would go well with the Bordeaux Hannibal had picked up just that morning, and as a bonus, Gideon would be much too tired to entertain guests.

But today, Abigail was with Miss Katz, Michelle was at school, and Hannibal was home early enough to contemplate some additional dinner plans. One kidney was hardly enough to feed three people, two of whom were growing.

Hannibal paused, taking a deep breath in. "I meant to buy you some better aftershave," He said, and his heart was pounding like it hadn't since he was a child, since the first time he held someone's life in his hands. The kitchen was dark, in deference to the headache that had begun to build behind Hannibal's' eyes. He opened the refrigerator, the closest light at hand, intending to offer Will something to drink.

Will Graham stepped out of the shadows, gun drawn. Hannibal let go of the door.

He had not seen Will since his release. His curls had gotten out of hand, long and unruly. Hannibal wanted to run his hands through them. It was a sudden, overwhelming, all-encompassing desire. He could not reign it in, could not help the trembling of his hands. Will cocked the gun.

"I believe we were interrupted, the last time we had this chat," Will growled.

"The last time you aimed a gun at me?"

"The last time I was able to confront you on equal footing."

"I'm unarmed," Hannibal pointed out, "You consider that to be equal footing?"

Will took a step forward. Hannibal held himself very still. "Yes," Will growled.

For a moment, they stared at each other, still and silent. Neither willing to make the next move.

"How would killing me make you feel, Will?" Hannibal finally asked.

"Righteous," Will insisted, but his voice wavered. His hands shook, even as he took another step forward, faster than Hannibal was prepared for. Hannibal jerked back, staring down the barrel of Will's gun.

"Will," He said, his voice catching, thick in his throat, "Will…" It should not have been so difficult to say. He was not the type to admit to anything. Plausible deniability was a necessity for living free. But Hannibal ached, now, in a way he'd never ached before. He forced the words past his teeth. "I'm sorry."

Out in the open, now. No more pretending he had not had a hand in Will's incarceration. It was worth it for the look on Will's face, a moment of startled pleasure that morphed into suspicion. Will's hands wavered. He stared at Hannibal as if he'd never seen him before. And maybe he hadn't. Maybe they were just now seeing each other for the first time.

"You're not," Will said, "You're not sorry. You just don't want me to shoot you."

"I don't believe that you're going to shoot me." Hannibal didn't believe it, not really, but it was more that he *had* to disbelieve it. There was no intimacy in a gunshot. To believe that Will is capable of killing him in such a cold, unfeeling manner, was to shed doubt on everything Hannibal believed Will to be.

Will drew in a shaking breath. His finger twitched on the trigger. Hannibal leaned forward, tilted his head back to welcome the barrel of the gun into the soft skin below his jaw. He did not flinch at the cold, or at the jerk of the metal against his flesh. He waited.

Will stared at him. "Damn it," He muttered, and then again, "Damn it. Damn it, *fuck*-" He interrupted himself on the last word, slamming the gun down on the counter. "You absolute *ass-"*

Hannibal reached for him, unable to stop himself anymore. He cupped Will's jaw in his hands. Will glared at him, fire and rage and absolute betrayal, a cacophonous haze of emotions, so utterly beautiful in his ferocity.

Hannibal's fingertips tucked a lock of hair behind Will's ear, grazing over the sensitive spot just behind his jaw. Will's eyelashes fluttered. He still looked angry, but he leaned into Hannibal's touch almost in spite of himself.

"I hate you," Will murmured, "I hate you so fucking much."

Hannibal kissed him. Or perhaps it was Will who had initiated, Hannibal could not be certain. He could not even be certain he was awake; surely, this was just the latest in a line of peaceful dreams.

But no, those were Will's curls, soft and overgrown between Hannibal's fingers. Hannibal broke the kiss to tilt Will's head back, nuzzling up under his jaw the way Will had always liked. Will stifled a moan into his own hand.

"Will," Hannibal murmured, "Dear Will, I'm so sorry."

Whatever peace they had found, it shattered. Will shoved him off, red-faced. They stared at each other, Will's chest heaving, his eyes darting wildly around the room. He grabbed his gun.

"Don't touch me," He said, and fled.

Hannibal was alone.

———

The monster in the basement went away. Michelle watched Tėtis and Abigail carry him up the stairs. No legs, no arms. All gone. All eaten.

They put Dr. Gideon in a big big suitcase, so he could go outside without the neighbors seeing. He had a mask over his face and a machine that breathed for him, puff puff puff. Michelle watched from the stairs. There was a dent in the wall from where she'd thrown the armor. She picked at a loose piece of wallpaper.

When Dr. Gideon was gone, tucked into the car for Tėtis's next big plan, they came back. Abigail hoisted her up into her arms, even though everyone said Michelle was 'getting much too big for this.' She didn't *feel* too big. She still felt small, tiny even. Everyone was so so very tall. Especially Tėtis.

"He's going to be dead," Michelle said into the curtain of Abigail's hair. Tėtis reached for her. She went with a grateful little sigh, snuggling in much more easily in Tėtis's sturdy strength.

"He is," Tėtis agreed. "Do you trust me?"

Michelle's face scrunched up. She hid it in the windowpane pattern of Tėtis's suit. Yes. Probably. Maybe. Most of the time. Lately, some of Tėtis's decisions were confusing to her. Finally, she shrugged.

Tėtis sighed. He cupped her chin in one big hand and guided her gaze to his face, if not quite his eyes. "I promised I would fix things, didn't I?"

"You did," Michelle said, because that was a much easier question to answer.

"Well, this is how I'm going to fix them. This is how I'm going to make the world safe for Will again, and for me."

"And then Will can come home?"

Tėtis smiled at her. Abigail was smiling too, which was better than when only Tėtis did it. Abigail was smart and she didn't talk around things like Tėtis did.

"The pieces are coming together again," Tėtis said, which was not an answer, but was almost one. Michelle nodded, and tried to squirm out of his arms.

"Go, then," She said, "Go now! Hurry up! What are you waiting for?"

Tėtis laughed and set her down. "Of course. Right away."

———

Framing Frederick Chilton had been the easiest decision in the world. Hannibal only wished he'd managed to do it sooner, before so much ire had settled in over Will like a heavy cloak. He wore it well. Will was made for vengeance and righteousness, for black-eyed rage.

But still, Hannibal might have preferred to see him draped in the softness of relief. A spark of a smile, the red-jeweled tones of lust. Hannibal had sketched Will a dozen times since his

incarceration, and none had compared to the way Will had looked in Hannibal's kitchen, his bed. Kneeling down to talk to Michelle, or settled shyly on the duvet, knees drawn up to his chest.

Hannibal had another sketch in his head on his way out the door, coat draped over his arm. It flew away on a breeze when he found Will in the waiting room, his back to Hannibal, his shoulders relaxed. Will turned to face him, and this too, cast a shadow of failure over anything Hannibal might have drawn.

Will had cut his hair, trimmed his beard. He wore a close-fitting salmon shirt and carefully pressed pants, and he smiled, a small smirk that promised mischief.

"You kept my appointment open," He said, prowling past Hannibal to the empty office. Hannibal shut the door behind him, staring openly. Will had come unarmed. Unguarded. He went for his usual chair. Hannibal was helpless to do anything but follow him.

"Of course," Hannibal said, "The time is yours, should you need it."

"I have to deal with you. And my… feelings, about you." Will grinned up from the chair, sharp-fanged, sharp-eyed. "I'd like to resume my therapy."

Hannibal sat across from him, choosing his words carefully. "*Only* your therapy?"

"Well," Will drawled, "We'll see how it goes."

———

Michelle kicked her feet impatiently in the back seat. The drive to Wolf Trap was always exceedingly long. She hated it.

"I thought Dr. Bloom was watching the dogs," She said, peeking eagerly out the window as they pulled up the driveway.

"She had to bring them back," Tėtis said as he parked. Michelle didn't wait for him, already scurrying out of the car. She hated the drive, but she liked the dogs, and she was excited to let them out and run about in the big empty fields with them. Even if seeing the house tugged at the thing inside her that hurt. It felt wrong to be in Wolf Trap without Will.

And then, as Michelle hurried for the door, it opened, dogs spilling out into the front yard. Michelle froze in place, tilting her head back to look up up up.

She could hear her heartbeat in her throat. Will stood in the doorway, looking down at her, completely stiff, his hand still on the knob. He was wide eyed, and his beard was different. Tidier. Everything about him was tidier. But it was still *Will*.

The painful thing inside of her felt so big, and so horrible. Tears welled up in Michelle's eyes, and she couldn't hide the secret thought she'd been having, not anymore. Not when Will was so close.

"Daddy!"

———

Will had been on edge at first. He hadn't been expecting company, and when it was Hannibal who arrived without warning, he couldn't help but slide a knife into his pocket. He could sink into relaxation in the office, when it was he who had caught Hannibal off guard, but here, with an unexpected visit, Will could be nothing but suspicious.

And then Michelle had tumbled out of the car.

She'd gotten bigger since she'd snuck in to visit him, impossible as it seemed. Taller, hair longer and pulled into a ponytail. She looked at him with huge, startled eyes, and Will's hands started to shake.

"Daddy!" Michelle shrieked, her voice cracking around the word. She seemed to realize what she said about the same time Will did, her next step stiff and jerky as she panicked halfway through it. Will didn't give her a chance to hesitate; he leapt down the small flight of stairs and had her up and in his arms before he could take another breath.

She still smelled like strawberries, clean and fresh. She clung to him with all the strength her tiny body could manage, nearly choking him in her desire to be closer. She sobbed into his shoulders, big, gulping cries that shook her entire body no matter how tightly Will clung. Will was crying too; Hannibal was a watery blur by the car, staring at them.

"Shh," Will whispered, pressing his lips to her hair. "Shh, it's alright now, I'm here. I… Daddy's here."

"Daddy," Michelle warbled again, staining his shirt collar with her sobs. "I waited and waited, and you were never coming home. Don't leave again, don't go."

"I won't," Will promised, "I'm not going anywhere." He glanced up to glare at Hannibal, a challenge in his eyes, and the look on Hannibal's face stopped him in his tracks.

Hannibal looked happy. More than that, Hannibal looked *rapturous*. And… surprised. Michelle's new name for Will had not been Hannibal's idea, he had not even known about it until just now. And he was *thrilled*.

He really does love us, Will thought numbly. He'd suspected, when he cornered Hannibal in the kitchen, but now here it was, laid bare for Will to see. Hannibal Lecter was in love with him. He wanted Will and Michelle to be connected like this.

He had been genuinely sorry, in the kitchen. He *regretted* the events of the last few months.

Will took a shaky step backwards, and then another, until he could let his legs give out from under him and collapse onto the steps, Michelle still held tightly against him. Hannibal held Will's gaze.

Shaken, uneasy, Will reached for him. It was not a decision, not truly. Will could not know what he did about Hannibal and really *choose* him, could he? But Will was aching, right now,

and he was willing to do whatever it took to make the pain stop, even if it was only temporary. Hannibal could do that for him, even after everything that had happened.

Hannibal, if possible, looked genuinely shocked. He did not wait for Will to change his mind. He crossed the yard in three quick strides, joining them on the porch steps and tugging Will into his arms. Will let himself be pulled, sandwiching Michelle between them.

Hannibal's eyes were damp. Will's were spilling over. He was still angry. He was *so* angry. There was no forgiving what Hannibal had done, no adjusting to the monster he had turned out to be.

But Will could call Jack tomorrow. He could make plans tomorrow. He could look for evidence tomorrow. Everything else could wait, until *tomorrow.* Tonight, Will wanted to pretend that it was months ago, and nothing had ever gone wrong.

They sat there, the three of them, and let the world turn around them.

Chapter End Notes

"Where has this chapter been?" you may ask, if you don't follow me on twitter. Well, first, I got married last month. Second. I have been very, very depressed. I'm working on it.

I don't have TOO much to say here. Will finally found out about Hannibloom. He's furious with Hannibal, but he loves Hannibal, but he's SO ANGRY and round and round we go on the Will Graham emotion train.

There's a bunch of lines from the show left out of the 'I'd like to resume my therapy, daddy ;)' scene. You can safely assume they still happened, I just don't like ripping off the show word for word and didn't think much of their conversation would be changed.

The Daddy scene. It has been planned for MONTHS. Ishxallxgood was the only one who knew. I have been waiting.

i wish I had more to say but I am still very tired. I start new meds today. Wish me luck.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

"Strats it's been four months!" "I KNOW SHUT UP."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will was an excellent fisherman. He was patient, he was quiet. Cautious.

He felt absolutely none of those things around Hannibal. Hannibal had thrown him the world's biggest curveball. Hannibal had turned out to have *feelings*.

'Psychopath' was not technically a diagnosis, but it was a term that cropped up over and over again in Will's line of work. You had to be a psychopath, to do what Hannibal did, to reach into people and pull out their insides while they were still breathing. To *consume* them.

Psychopaths, by definition, lacked empathy. They didn't form genuine emotional attachments. But no one could look at the way Hannibal was with Michelle, and not see emotion. Hannibal loved Michelle.

Hannibal loved *Will*, and that was the more troubling thing. It lingered in Will's head, a constant echo. Hannibal was cautious around him, careful not to touch without invitation. When Will had arrived, two hours early for dinner, on Michelle's request, he had wanted a kiss. Will could see it in his eyes.

Kissing Hannibal would break him, would shatter every bone in his body into a thousand pieces. He could not kiss Hannibal and still be what Jack wanted, so instead, he stalled.

"Break up with Dr. Bloom, yet?" He whispered, low enough that their daughter, *their* daughter, did not hear it, too busy wrapping her arms tight around Will's legs and burying her face into his thigh.

The look on Hannibal's face was answer enough. Will shrugged and turned away.

"Hey, beautiful," he said, hoisting Michelle up into his arms, "Woah, did you get bigger?"

"Not in *two whole days*," Michelle protested.

"Are you sure? I hear kids your age are always growing. Why don't we go look at your height chart?"

The height chart, along with Michelle's dinner, was in the kitchen. Jack would come after she had been tucked into bed, a bit late for anyone to be eating, but it would allow them to speak freely. Or at least, to give the appearance of speaking freely. Hannibal had been putting the finishing touches on her plate when Will arrived, a child's portion of leftover pork with a smattering of bright vegetables, minus the thick sauce Hannibal would normally drizzle over it all. Will stopped dead in the doorway, his grip tightening on Michelle for a brief moment.

"Daddy," she complained, and it *still* startled him, every time, "you're *squashing* me!"

"Am I?" Will asked, tickling her sides until she laughed, "Well, we can't have that. Go wash up for dinner, we'll check your height after." He set her down and watched her go, then whirled on Hannibal. "Do we need to have a conversation about her diet?"

Hannibal had been looking at them both with an unguarded fondness, but now he closed off, slid his public mask back into place. Will wanted to claw his skin off. "I've never fed her anything I wouldn't put into my own stomach," He responded stiffly, "And I've always given her the best cut-"

"You know why that doesn't reassure me," Will interrupted, "don't you?"

They stared each other down.

"I am unused to having my parenting choices called into question," Hannibal said. Deflection, always deflection. Because he didn't think he'd done anything wrong.

"*Our* parenting choices now, aren't they? Because Michelle certainly seems to think so, and I won't let you yank either of us around like that. Is she my daughter, or isn't she?"

"Will," Hannibal said with a slightly hurt expression, "of *course* she's your daughter."

"Then that means I get a say in how she's raised." Hannibal said nothing, and Will sighed. "Maybe you can't confess to it," he whispered, "Where someone might hear? I'll show you I'm not wearing a wire, but if you can't make yourself say it, then I'll make it easy for you. If that isn't pig, *regular* pig, Hannibal, you go throw it in the trash *right now."*

Hannibal stared at him for another long minute. "It's pig," he finally said, admitting to nothing, but easing the tension in Will's chest, "I will show you the butcher's receipts, if you need them."

"I don't," Will told him, "But I need a promise. Reassurance. If you decide to add anything more… *exotic* to your dinner table, you come talk to *me* before you shove that down our daughter's throat."

"I would never *shove*-"

"Hannibal!" Will's glare was icy, unyielding. They stared each other down, two men who were unused to another person's presence in their lives. One of whom was a goddamn *cannibal* who was going to give their kid Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease.

Michelle came bouncing in, skidding to a stop in the doorway, underneath the impossibly *normal* height chart Hannibal had etched into the doorway. A concession to the ordinary. For a moment, they were two ordinary parents. Hannibal handed Will a knife.

“I defer to you,” he said, turning back to the sink.

With the flat of the blade, Will measured Michelle’s height against the doorway. “You’re not standing on your toes, are you?” He teased.

“*Daddy*,” She whined, taking any excuse to use the term, “Of *course* not!”

“Well then.” Will pulled her close, turning her to look at the knife. “Not enough for another mark, but you *did* grow just a little bit.”

Michelle peered close, close enough that Will worried she’d smack her head off the knife. Then she giggled. “That’s almost a *whole* centimeter! Tėtis, did you see?”

“That’s what happens when we eat our vegetables,” Hannibal told her, scooping her up and settling her in her seat.

———

Will managed to keep up a good deal of banter until Michelle had eaten, vanishing upstairs to brush her teeth and ready herself for bed. Then the awkward silence returned, Hannibal’s back to him as he began to finish the preparations for their own meal.

“These are lovely fish, Will,” Hannibal finally said. Will watched the shift of his shirt over his shoulders, the smooth planes of his back. Will had seen him shirtless, dressing in the morning or waking Will with a soft kiss. Will’s mouth was dry.

“Best I could catch, given the short notice.”

“Perhaps when the weather is a bit warmer, we could make it a family trip? I’m afraid Michelle isn’t quite suited for ice fishing.”

No, she wasn’t. With Will’s terrible luck, the ice would thin and she would slip right through.

“Too small for fly fishing,” Will drawled, “the currents would knock her flat. I’ve been fixing up a boat. Might be a bit cramped for three, though.”

Hannibal’s hands stilled. The lines of his shoulders tensed, hunched up the slightest bit. “It would do Michelle good to have a trip with the three of us together.”

“There’s a lot of things that would do Michelle good,” Will pointed out, “having parents who aren’t in prison is one of them.”

“Thankfully, I’ve no intention of going to prison.” Hannibal turned, wiping his hands dry on a dishcloth. His gaze burned Will’s skin. Those eyes had seen him bared, seen him vulnerable. Will ached.

“Sometimes we don’t get a choice,” Will said bitterly, eyes closing to avoid that knowing look.

“Sometimes we make choices we regret,” Hannibal replied.

“Regret implies guilt. It implies a willingness to change.”

“I would not let you be taken from her again. From us. Is that not change?”

Will opened his eyes. Hannibal was closer now, close enough to loom over Will where he leaned against the kitchen island. Will resisted the urge to straighten up and stare him down. There was nothing to fear. The lion was not in the room. The lion was in *Will*.

“Not change enough,” Will said, “if you would continue to risk yourself.”

Hannibal blinked. “Is that concern I hear in your voice, Will?”

“It’s warning,” Will rasped, tilting his head back. “There’s not always a plan B, Hannibal.”

Hannibal’s lips were slightly flush, as though he’d bitten them. Will remembered the taste of him, underneath coffee and toothpaste. He had traced the seam with his own tongue countless times. Will’s lips parted. Hannibal braced his hands on the marble countertop on either side of him. He was close enough for Will to feel his breath.

The doorbell rang.

“Duty calls,” Will breathed. Hannibal stepped back. His cheeks were flush, now, his eyes slightly glazed. Will straightened up. In the hall, tiny, uneven footsteps raced for the door, and it thunked against the wall as Michelle threw it open.

“Go away.” Michelle’s voice was loud and insistent. Hannibal hurried past Will, ever the graceful host.

Jack was motionless in the doorway, staring down at Michelle with a concerned expression on his face .

“Go away,” Michelle repeated as they reached her, “You aren’t taking my Daddy anywhere.” She turned on her heel, attempting to slam the door in his face. Hannibal grabbed for the door while Will scooped Michelle into his arms. Jack’s irritated and concerned look spread to encompass Will as well.

No, Jack, Will thought irritably, as Hannibal ushered Jack inside with sincere apologies, *I didn’t tell my* ***second grader*** *we were trying to honey trap her father.*

“Michelle,” Will said, “That was very rude.”

“I don’t care,” Michelle said stubbornly, throwing her arms around Will’s neck, “he can’t take you away again.”

Watching Jack Crawford's face change from irritation to pale shock was *almost* worth the argument they were going to have later. Will gave him a wry smile, turning to carry Michelle back up to her bedroom. "I'll tuck her in and meet you both in the dining room." To Michelle, he added, "I'm not going anywhere. We talked about this."

Michelle huffed, tucking her face into his throat. Her hair was still damp from her shower, and she'd left wet footprints down the hall in her haste to get to the door. "The police can take you away," she argued, "they can take anyone they want away and then you never see them again."

"But you *did* see me again. You're seeing me right now." Will set her down on the bed, taking the brush from her nightstand and carefully combing out her hair the way Hannibal had shown him.

"It took ages and ages!" She protested, and Will could not find fault with that argument. Still, he continued to clumsily braid her hair, pressing a kiss to her temple when he was done.

"But you saw me again," he said, his voice soft, "I am *always* going to find you. Do you believe me?"

Michelle turned, looking up at Will's chin with a deep frown on her tiny face. She was beyond the easy belief of childhood. He knew that magic, the fantasy of things like mermaids and Santa Claus, was not a regular part of her upbringing, before or after Hannibal. She believed in things that could be proven to her, and from what Will had been told, her trust was hard earned.

Michelle threw her arms around Will's neck, nearly knocking him from the bed with the force of her hug.

"You come back," she mumbled, "you promise me you'll always come back."

"I promise," Will said, hugging her back just as tightly.

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Will stayed to help with the dishes. This was a bit too familiar, standing side-by-side at the double sink.

"Will," Hannibal said softly, when the dishes had all been dried and meticulously set away, "I'd like it if you stayed the night."

Will leaned back against the counter, looking up at dark eyes that could not quite manage to be helpful. "You know why I'm not going to do that, right?"

Hannibal gave a stiff, sharp nod. Will almost felt sorry for him. No, that wasn't quite right. Will *did* feel sorry for him, against his better judgement.

"I won't play second fiddle to your alibis," Will said. It felt like someone else was saying it. Like he was parroting words for Jack Crawford; dangle the hook and watch him bite.

Hannibal had bitten him once, before Will knew to be wary of those sharp fangs. He'd sunk his teeth into Will's skin and Will had gone hot and cold all at once, a livewire beneath Hannibal's sturdy body.

But that was then, and this was now, and Will felt less like the fisherman than the bait, a worm wriggling, pinned in place and soon to be devoured by sharp, sharp teeth.

Pinned, and trapped, as Hannibal turned and braced his hands on the counter on either side of Will. So close that Will could smell his cologne, subtle and natural and infinitely better than whatever Will threw on in the mornings.

"There has never been anything between myself and Alana Bloom," Hannibal told him, his voice soft. He was, for a moment, an ordinary man, looking at Will with a sort of desperation that tugged at something deep in Will's chest. "At least, nothing of any relevance."

"I dunno," Will drawled, tilting his head back. It gave him space to breathe, but also exposed the vulnerable curve of his throat. He saw the way Hannibal's eyes lingered over it, tracing his skin so thoroughly, Will could almost feel the touch. "I'd say a condom is pretty relevant, wouldn't you?"

There was hurt in Hannibal's eyes. There was hurt in Will's chest. Will wondered if that was all there was to them, just hurt sliced deep under the skin.

"Soft words," Hannibal promised him, "A few kisses, nothing more. She spent the night once, too drunk to make her way home, and even then, I did not touch her. I couldn't."

Will reached up and trailed a fingertip over Hannibal's lips. Hannibal's eyes fluttered closed, as if that soft touch had been a full-body caress. "Insecure I may have been," Will whispered, "but I'd never intended to share you."

"I was in mourning," Hannibal said. He was brave enough, now, to bring a hand up, cupping Will's cheek. "I missed you."

Will believed him, though believing was like teetering on the edge of a pit, with no way to see the bottom. There was some truth to his vitriol, though, some honesty to his ache. Will may have shut Hannibal out, but his easy transference of his affection made Will want to cut him deep, to see the same hurt spill over Hannibal's eyes. "Not enough, it seems."

"Too much," Hannibal said, "more than I could stand alone."

"That's not why. She makes a good excuse note for teacher, doesn't she?"

There was silence between them, nothing but soft breath, Hannibal's hand on Will's face, Will's fingers on Hannibal's chin. Hannibal would not admit to anything. Of course not, that would make it too easy. But if Will was going to Jonah swallowed up by the whale, he would not bring anyone else down with him.

"I've always meant what I said to you, Will."

Will's eyes flicked over Hannibal's face. His fingers turned sharp, dragging down over Hannibal's throat to press against his chest. Funny, how a monster's heartbeat could feel just as fast and unsteady as Will's own. "Prove it."

Hannibal cupped Will's face in both hands and tilted him up to meet his mouth. Slow, at first, gentle and chaste, and then harder, a man starved. Will clutched at Hannibal's shirt. One of Hannibal's hands found Will's hair and tugged until he gasped, lips parting for Hannibal's insistent tongue. Hannibal's body pressed him back against the counter, a line of heat at Will's front. He was hard against Will's hip, slotting a thigh between Will's own, and it was almost, *almost* alright.

Will pushed him back, gasping for breath. Hannibal's lips were wet, his eyes hungry. Will had no desire to know what expression lay on his own face. He ducked under Hannibal's arm, crossing the kitchen until there was enough space between them for him to breathe again. He lingered in the doorway, just a few paces from his coat and shoes, a few paces from Hannibal. Scylla and Charybdis, desire and morality.

"I won't be your side piece, Hannibal. All in, or fold?" Will reached for his coat.

———

Alana knew why she was there without Hannibal needing to say a word. He took her into the study and served her a glass of the beer he'd brewed especially for her. Her hands had trembled when she took it, and her smile had been glassy. There was no dishonesty between them. There had been very little to begin with, besides that which Hannibal naturally presented to the world.

"I told Will you missed him," Alana said, sipping so lightly at her beer she may as well have set it down entirely. "I told him I was a distraction. 'Shared suffering,' I called it, but I don't think I ever could have really understood what you were going through, could I?"

Hannibal sat beside her, his hand gently wrapped around hers, stilling the soft shiver of her fingertips. "You aren't a distraction, Alana. You are my very dear friend."

"Not so dear to Will," she whispered, the tears finally spilling over her cheeks, "and really, not to you. Taking advantage of a moment of despair is…"

Hannibal relieved her of her beer and pulled her hand to his mouth, pressing a soft kiss across the knuckles. A sob broke through Alana's lips, shaking her shoulders. "I am well aware of your affection for Will. Grief tangles us up, brings things to the surface we might otherwise have ignored. And it is worth noting that I didn't rebuke you."

"My *affection* for him." Alana laughed wetly, wiping at her tears with one hand. "I didn't believe him. Didn't trust him, drove him to…" She trailed off, glancing nervously at Hannibal, he shook his head.

"I swore, even while Will resented me, that he had not sent Matthew Brown after me. I swear it to you now, Alana."

Alana nodded shakily, wiping at her eyes again. “Have we ruined him? After so much time away, he can’t ever be the Will we knew again.”

“He cannot,” Hannibal agreed, “but we can make sure that we offer him whatever he needs going forward.”

“I don’t think there’s anything I can offer him that he would accept coming from me.”

Hannibal smiled at her, as soft and genuine as any he had ever offered. “Will is not one to hold a grudge. In time, we will all move forward.”

Alana nodded again, staring down at her feet. She freed her hand from Hannibal’s grasp, picking at a damp spot on her skirt from her tears. “I should go. Thank you for having me over. Face-to-face.”

“Alana.”

She turned to him, red eyed and distraught. Hannibal felt nothing. All of his regret was taken up with Will. But he knew how to mimic, how to reflect the kindness other people expected.

“Thank you for being there.”

Alana’s smile was broken. It piqued a curiosity in Hannibal that was never quite sated, a hunger for the way people ticked and what made up their insides. He pushed it down. Alana had never earned a place on his table.

And besides, there was Will to think of.

———

“Is Daddy going to come live with us again?” Michelle was eating gingerbread. She liked gingerbread, it was the best part of the season, better than all the other desserts and dinners Tėtis made when the weather turned cold. He would make a big big batch to be frozen and if she was lucky, there would be leftovers all the way through to her birthday.

“Again?” Tėtis asked, laying out the pictures. She’d been promised another huge cookie if she focused, and Michelle was ready.

“Yeah, like when he was sick, and he lived here before he had to go away.” Horse, Lady, Bird. Michelle dragged the picture of the horse closer.

“He was only staying with us temporarily,” Tėtis corrected, “and I think it’s unlikely that he’ll be moving in any time soon. How would he take care of the dogs?”

Michelle bit her lip, tracing her finger over the mess of the horse’s tummy. “But he’ll still come around all the time, right?”

“I believe so. He enjoys our family dinners.”

“That’s alright then.” Michelle frowned and pulled the lady closer. She had cuts all on her chest too. “I don’t like what they did to the horse.”

Tėtis watched her carefully. She knew that if she ever got upset, he would take the pictures away. But she’d never gotten upset before. They were just pictures. Pictures of bodies, and who was scared of bodies? Bodies weren’t even alive anymore; they couldn’t hurt you. “Just the horse?”

Michelle shrugged. “The lady’s just dead. They cut open all the dead people like that, you showed me. They don’t do horse autopsies; they just burn them.”

“Cremate,” Tėtis corrected, “And this one was special.” Tėtis stacked the pictures up, one by one, the horse on top of the lady on top of the bird. “Do you remember the dolls you used to have? Where every doll was smaller and had a different uniform?”

“They put the lady inside the horse?” Michelle asked, crinkling up her nose.

“And the bird inside of her,” Tėtis confirmed, “It flew out during the autopsy.

“The bird, inside the lady, inside the horse, all at the same time?” Michelle asked.

“Yes.”

“And the bird was *alive*?”

“Unhappy and damp, but yes, very much alive.”

Michelle frowned and pushed the pictures away. “That’s not a *thing*, Tėtis.”

Tėtis handed her another cookie. “One would think.”

———

Peter Bernardone did not remind Will of Michelle, not quite. Neurodivergence was, after all, a vast and sprawling category, and the places where Peter and Michelle fit did not quite overlap.

But one could find similarities in any two people, if they looked hard enough. There was a vulnerability to Peter, in the way he avoided eye contact, in the way he talked in circles around the subject.

He did not quite remind Will of Michelle, but he reminded Will an awful lot of himself.

He said as much to Hannibal, in their mockery of a therapy session. The chairs were closer than he remembered them being. Hannibal’s doing, no doubt; his hands twitched on the arm rests of his chair. Will knew Hannibal ached to touch him, to reach out to where he sat, closed off and cold.

So Will leaned away.

“He worried more about the bird than the woman,” Hannibal observed.

“Empathy for animals is easy,” Will told him, “they reflect the personality traits we overlay onto them. Family pets become more like children. Intelligence and intent are applied to ordinary acts of instincts.”

“We make of them what we wish.”

“And in doing so, make something we can feel for.” Will closed his eyes, picturing Peter’s menagerie of creatures, loud and crowded, but well-loved. “Empathy for people is a lot harder. Our emotions extend only so far. Most people are trapped inside their own heads. Human selfishness.”

“We want others to reflect our expectations and grow irritated when they don’t.” Hannibal tilted his head, watchful. “Tell me, Will. Have I reflected your expectations?”

“You have… *exceeded* my expectations,” Will breathed, staring back at Hannibal. “As a father, as a partner. What else should I call it, when you have met every goalpost, and then added a few more while I wasn’t looking?”

“And yet you are irritated with me.”

Will laughed wryly. “Irritation is a *mild* word. Nothing about what I feel for you is *mild.”*

“What you feel for me was intense enough to drive a man to murder.”

Will rolled his eyes. “It always comes back to that, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t hold you at fault,” Hannibal explained, folding his hands, “It didn’t bear your signature.”

Curious, Will asked, “And what would my signature be?”

Hannibal’s lips parted. Will could see desire in his eyes, in every line of his being. What a pair they made. “If you were to kill me, Will, I imagine it would be… intimate.”

“Guns lack intimacy.” Will tilted his head back, thoughtful. “I’ve dreamed of it, you know.”

“Of killing me?”

“Of putting an *end* to you.”

“Removing me entirely from your life. Erasing me more thoroughly than death.”

“I’d have to pry you out piece by piece. You’ve left shrapnel.”

“We all do, in those who love us.”

“Are you so confident in my affections?”

“Yes.” Hannibal’s voice did not hesitate, did not waver. Will watched him breathe, the steady rise and fall of his chest.

“Love is supported by a pillar of honesty,” Will drawled, “Tell me, how is our dear friend, Dr. Bloom?”

Hannibal was always calm, placid. Nothing ever disrupted the steady coolness of his features, nothing sent ripples through the water. But Will could see beneath, now, could see the way he teemed with hope and excitement. Life, beneath the mask, crawling and surging and waiting to be unleashed.

“Regretful,” Hannibal said softly, “and no doubt lonely.”

“Shouldn’t you be comforting her?”

“And leave you to play second fiddle?”

There was a sudden urge to pat Hannibal like one of his dogs, to croon ‘good boy’ and reward him for his obedience. For a moment, Will relished the look that would no doubt cross Hannibal’s face if he tried.

“No building stands on a single pillar,” Will whispered, “love also requires intimacy. If I were going to kill you, Hannibal, I’d do it with my hands.”

There. A hint of a shudder, the slightest flicker of Hannibal’s features. The tip of Hannibal’s tongue wet his lips. Will let him enjoy it for a moment, and then reminded him of why they were here.

“But then where would that leave our daughter, with me locked away?” Will hissed, and let the knife-sharp words dig in.

———

“We should have gotten a babysitter.” Minutes away, Will’s nerves got the better of him

Hannibal glanced at Will, then into the backseat. Michelle had sprawled herself thoroughly, her face half-smushed against the window. She was not asleep, but there was no reason for Will to know that. And as much as Hannibal approved of her observations, it was quite possible she would pretend herself right into an actual dream, if he left her at it. Faking sleep could be very boring, after all.

“I’m afraid I’m fresh out,” Hannibal replied. He could have left her with Abigail, but Will would have wanted to meet another babysitter, to be there when Michelle was tucked into the arms of a stranger.

“Right, I forgot, you *ate* the last one,” Will growled. He was always much more tense when the subject of Abigail arose. Hannibal sometimes worried that he would never be able to move past it, at least not before she was brought back into Will’s life.

“I was under the impression you didn’t believe Peter Bernardone to be a serial killer.”

“He’s not!” Will hissed, checking the back to ensure Michelle was still asleep.

“And if you thought he was a danger to our child, would you have allowed me to bring her?”

“No!”

Hannibal waited patiently. After a moment, Will deflated. “He’s not a danger to her. He’s not a danger to *anyone*. I just don’t know how to *prove* it. How do you prove the absence of something? How do you get people to listen to a man they’ve already cast their judgement on?”

Hannibal put the car in park and reached for Will, but Will was already running.

———

Peter wandered amongst the cages, freedom inside confinement.

A man inside a horse. A bird inside a woman inside a horse. Hurt inside sickness inside hope inside a man. Peter Berdardone looked resigned. He spoke slower now, his motions jerky and unstable, but he was not a stupid man. Had never been a stupid man. He looked at Will now with sorrow and relief. The worst was over. There would be no more dead girls.

But there was nothing left for Peter, either. He had put his faith in a man who had used it to destroy him, and now there was nothing left for either of them.

Peter spoke in metaphor, in poetry. Will wondered what more he might have found, given the chance. Given the help he was meant to have.

“I envy your hate,” Will told him, “It makes it easier.”

“Makes what easier?” Peter asked.

“Killing them.” Hating them, despising them, Will could move. He shot Garrett Jacob Hobbs ten times. He dreamed about it, wrapped in his ire, in *righteousness*.

But Hannibal.

It would be just, killing Hannibal. It might even be *right*. There were people who would gladly see the Chesapeake Ripper dead and buried. And there was Abigail, cold and dead and eaten.

But Will.

Love did not have to be right. It didn’t have to be beautiful, or kind. Love could be vicious and cruel, could rip a man to pieces. Hannibal loved Will, had possibly never felt for anyone else before Michelle and Will. And Will loved him, dreamed of him, imagined him tousled in bed or bleeding out under Will’s hands.

It was so much harder to kill when you loved someone.

“I didn’t kill him,” Peter said, ripping Will from his thoughts, “I just wanted him to feel what they felt. To know what it was like to wake up wrapped in death, and *choke* on it.”

———

The man was bloody. So very bloody. Michelle had never seen so much blood in once place. It seeped out from the horse over his shoes, it dripped from his hands. Peering out from the corner, Michelle wondered what it was like. Was it sticky? Smooth? It looked like raspberry jam with the raspberries not all the way squished, thick and oozing.

Daddy wasn’t shooting him. Michelle didn’t know why. He looked dead already, and she’d been listening, she knew he was bad to Peter. She didn’t really know who *Peter* was, but if he was Daddy’s friend, he had to be good. Michelle didn’t like people who were mean to Daddy’s friends.

But then Tėtis reached out and stopped the gun, and Michelle thought that was even weirder, but if Tėtis said no then it must not be a good idea. And they were so close, and the queasy sick feeling that Michelle got when she saw them together eased. Tėtis was touching Daddy’s face and Daddy was *letting* him, and maybe things would be a little bit better now, maybe-

Something else caught her eye and Michelle gasped. “Can I pet the sheep?”

Daddy startled really badly, jerking back from Tėtis. “God damn it, Hannibal, this is *exactly* why I said-“. Daddy caught her halfway across the barn, scooping her up off the floor with a groan.

“But I wanted to pet the sheep!” Michelle insisted. Daddy gave her a look. Just a look. Not happy or sad. Just blank.

“Next time,” He said, cupping her head and guiding her to hide her face in his jacket. “Don’t look.”

“But there’s a sheep!”

“*Don’t look.”*

Chapter End Notes

WHEW. So. That was. A process. Hopefully the next chapter won’t take quite as long…

This one was tricky because there just isn’t much that would change here? Will’s betrayal and the parallel he feels with Peter might be a little worse, but they wouldn’t fundamentally CHANGE just because he had a relationship and a child with Hannibal. Nor do his conversations with Jack change, although there’s a lot more of Jack Staring Disapprovingly. It’s why there’s so little dialogue in the end: I would have just been copying the show word-for-word.

Will's honeypot mission is slightly more literal this time around. Jack knows they were together, after all, though he doesn't know how close they were until he realizes it's WILL who Michelle is calling Daddy. Still, Jack was expecting less kissing. Zero kissing. Don't kiss him, Will, his mouth tastes like people.

Will has been having the 'my kid ate people' revelation for a while, but every time it comes up, he kind of pushes it aside. He couldn't really do that this time, so he decided to exercise his parental influence. And Hannibal is still trying to be the 'typical husband in the doghouse' as if that will fix things.

Will knows he loves Hannibal, he just thinks he can love him and still get him locked up. We shall see how that goes.

That being said, he is GENUINELY pissed about the Alana thing, and more than happy to lord it over Hannibal, Mr. I-Missed-You-So-Much-I-Made-Out-With-Our-Friend. He's a little pissed at Alana too, but not as much, as he knows Hannibal and how much Hannibal likely had to do with that whole thing. Thus why he feels he's protecting Alana when he demands a clear breakup.

THE KIDS ARE NOT ALRIGHT. Will is starting to clue in that Michelle is maybe a little… off. It'll be a while before he truly gets it, though.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

> EDIT: IF YOU ALREADY READ IT, READ IT AGAIN, AN ENTIRE SCENE AT THE END WAS ACCIDENTALLY DELETED.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

No one can be fully aware of another human being unless we love them. I love you, Will.

Will woke gasping, soaked through his sheets and aching between his thighs. He could still feel the thick splash of Hannibal's blood across his face, though the heavy red drops diluted to clear sweat as he laid there.

I love you, Will.

Will knew that already. There was no reason for his subconscious to confirm it, except to torment him some more. To wrap heavy chains of guilt around Will's shoulders, weighing him down, crushing his ribs and constricting his lungs.

What did it mean to be loved by the Chesapeake Ripper? What kind of love did a monster feel?

Affection, certainly. Michelle was proof enough of that. Protectiveness, given Hannibal's refusal to find her a new babysitter. Or possessiveness. They were one and the same.

Love of self. Narcissism reflected back at him through child's eyes. Michelle had stood before a man dripping blood and viscera and cared only about petting a sheep.

Hannibal and Will had not spoken on the way home. Had not spoken at all, for several days. Will could not think of what words to say.

I don't know what you're teaching her, but I want it to stop.

Too forward. He was already pushing his luck by putting his foot down about meals. Meals Michelle had no doubt eaten before, which Will tried not to think about. However much Hannibal preached family and co-parenting, Will had no doubt that he considered himself first and foremost in charge of Michelle's upbringing. Any choices given to Will were merely scraps Hannibal had thrown him.

And Will felt, somehow, like he was making all the wrong ones. There were really only two options; see Hannibal behind bars, or see him killed. Either would leave Michelle parentless. There was no one on this earth who would consider him stable enough to raise a child on his own, including Will himself.

(There was, in the back of his mind, a third option. The three of them, together, free of any law that may have separated them. But that was never really on the table, was it? Will was Jack's man, through-and-through. He was not a good person, but he wanted to be. He wanted to prove that he could be, that he was capable of it, regardless of dreams.)

That was how Hannibal loved Michelle. Wholly, fiercely, regardless of outside opinion.

But how did he love Will? Storge vs. Eros, love of a child vs. love of the body.

No, that wasn't quite right. It would have been easier if it was. If Will could dismiss Hannibal's attraction to him as some ill-fated lust. If he could disregard it entirely, something that would fade away in time, something Will needn't bother to worry about.

Philia, then. Love of the mind. Cherished. Understood.

Reciprocated.

Will stood over an empty washing machine in his empty house and tried not to feel like *he* was empty too.

———

Michelle had not taken to Jack Crawford any more pleasantly the second time she met him. She'd looked him up and down with a sort of bone-deep suspicion, even when he crouched down to her level to speak to her.

"Will isn't going away," he said, his voice calm and level. "Will is my friend, I'm going to look after him."

"He was your friend before he went away, too," Michelle told him, in a particularly snippy tone Hannibal wasn't sure he approved of. Jack, far from being offended, nodded seriously.

"He was," he agreed, "And I let him down. But that's not going to happen again, alright?"

Michelle looked from Jack to Hannibal, and then back again. Jack remained patient. Perhaps, in another lifetime, he might have been a good father. Patient, kind. Willing to mislead a child if it soothed them.

Neither of them was going anywhere, but Hannibal noticed that Jack only made promises for Will. He wondered how Jack planned to justify it to himself, if he were ever to prove Hannibal's guilt. Perhaps he thought Michelle could be reasoned with, if the parent he took away turned out to be a killer.

He had, after all, never been a parent in this universe. He didn't understand the sort of things children cared about.

"You have to take care of him this time," Michelle told Jack sternly.

"I'll do everything in my power to look after him," Jack promised. It was not enough to wipe the look of suspicion from Michelle's face, but it was enough for her to step out of the

doorway and free Jack from the entryway, disappearing into the family room with her dolls.

“We’re hiring, you know,” Jack told Hannibal with a grin, “I’ve seen trained professionals who weren’t half as intimidating.

“She has a very busy schedule,” Hannibal mused, “But I’m sure I could lend her to you from time to time.”

“Don’t tell Will, he thinks I monopolize too much of his life already.”

“On that point, I’m afraid he and Michelle agree.”

Michelle had been fed earlier, to give Jack the privacy he needed to speak his mind. That, and so Hannibal could serve his preferred fair without drawing Will’s ire. Co-parenting, after all, involved compromise, and Hannibal was willing to make small adjustments to his lifestyle if it made Will’s trust a more attainable goal. Will, of course, had no way of knowing what Hannibal served when he wasn’t around, but Hannibal disliked lying. He preferred to do as little of it as possible, instead coiling the truth around itself to suit his needs. Will would see through such attempts, and there was little doubt in Hannibal’s mind that Will would ask after Michelle’s diet again.

On the other hand, Hannibal was not beholden to Jack. He was slightly amused that Jack would poke at his food and then still willingly consume it, but he supposed Jack felt the reward of playing a long game would be worth it. Or perhaps he’d simply developed a taste for it. One did, eventually. Hannibal’s first taste had been both unwilling and accidental. His second had been an experiment. It was not until he’d tried a few recipes that he truly developed a desire.

“How are you and Will?” Jack asked, entirely unsubtle. There was no point in it; it was not a subtle question.

“Fractured,” Hannibal admitted. The truth, delivered in small, easily accepted bites, was always better than a lie. “But improving, a bit at a time.

“Will’s time in Chilton’s care was difficult for him.”

“Jack.” Hannibal’s voice was stern. Their eyes met, two men firm in their convictions, playing a dangerous and drawn-out game. “I can no longer share information on Will’s mental health with you. I haven’t had that liberty for a long time, and Will’s privacy has never been more crucial than it is now. We are trying to rebuild our family. We need time, and Will needs to know that he can trust me.”

Hannibal could see the question in Jack’s eyes, the doubt. ‘Can he trust you?’

Jack was not inept enough to show his hand by asking, but Hannibal was certain the answer showed on his face. *More than he can anyone else.*

Jack took another sip of his wine, sliding deftly from one plan of attack to the next.

“Will never told me you were together.”

*And now you're left wondering if your bloodhound is really loyal to **you**.*

"Will values his privacy. As do I," Hannibal added, "And there was a child to think about. Best to figure ourselves out first and let the rest fall into place as it would."

"And now you're co-parenting." Jack's gaze was shrewd. This, too, he surely considered to be a game on Hannibal's part. All aspects of his relationship with Will, but especially his willingness to share Michelle. Hannibal did not fit the profiles Jack was used to working with. He was not unfeeling, not unattached. He was not devoid of the ability to empathize, though he certainly bothered with it less often than most people.

Jack would continue to try and fit him into those boxes, though. He would explain Michelle away as an experiment, a convenience. Will, another tool in Hannibal's kit. Jack was, in the end, neither as smart nor as interesting as Will, and his investigative capabilities were accordingly limited.

"We are," Hannibal agreed. "We are currently working to set a schedule that best suits Michelle's needs. It will be easier when the summer comes and school is out for her."

"I never knew Will wanted children."

Hannibal smiled, the small, unassuming smile he saved for company. "Sometimes children come to us whether we are looking for them or not."

———

"Do you have any regrets?" Will asked. They no longer bothered with the farce of Hannibal's office. They took wine in Hannibal's study, and whiskey on Will's porch.

Tonight was a whiskey night. Michelle bounded through the snow with the dogs, bundled up in layers and layers of thick fabric, her mouse hat crammed crookedly onto her head.

Hannibal was quiet for a long moment. Whiskey was not his drink of choice, but even so, he took a considerably long time to mull over his next sip.

"Had you asked me a few months ago, I would have said no," he finally said, swallowing down both the bitter liquid and his own immense pride, "generally, when I choose to do something, I do so for a reason. But now…" He looked at Will with his dark, open gaze. Too honest with Will, too certain that Will did not have it in him to hurt Hannibal. And in that, Will was not entirely sure he was wrong.

Will looked out into the field, as their daughter tumbled head over heels into a snow drift, laughing gleefully. "Do you regret what you've done to *her*?"

Hannibal followed his gaze. Michelle popped back up, red faced and ecstatic as she barreled into one of the larger dogs. They took her rough playfulness with grace, well trained and protective of children.

"I regret that she had to miss you," he said carefully. He'd said similar things to others, blaming his emotions on his *doubt* of Will's innocence, but they both knew the truth. There

were no lies between them, not here.

“That’s still about what you did to *me,”* Will reminded him, “This is about *her*. This is about a room full of blood and the stench of death, and Michelle only caring about the *sheep*.”

“Children often have a strange innocence about them.”

“Or a trained disregard.”

Hannibal turned the full weight of his gaze on Will. Contemplating. Considering.

“I chose many years ago not to raise her in an environment of fear,” he said. “Better she knows that the world is not always kind and be prepared to face it.”

“That’s nice,” Will drawled, “But can we not raise a baby sociopath while we’re at it?”

Hannibal’s lip curled. “Really, Will, she’s hardly old enough for you to pin a personality disorder onto her.”

“I’m not saying she’s cluster B at the ripe old age of *eight*,” Will growled, “Merely suggesting that a lack of empathy can be *taught*.”

“It can also be a symptom of autism spectrum disorders.”

“That’s a lack of *expressed* empathy,” Will corrected, though he was certain Hannibal was merely deflecting, “Usually stemming from a difficulty with social cues. It’s not an *inability* to empathize.”

“Children are self-centered creatures by nature.”

“Hannibal.” Will’s voice was sharp in the rapidly encroaching darkness. “What are you trying to make of her?”

“All I want for my child,” Hannibal said firmly, “For *our* child, is for her to be safe and happy.”

———

On occasion, they had to pass Michelle between them both, when their work schedules no longer lined up perfectly with her needs. Will picked her up from school most days, having the more flexible schedule of the two of them. Other days, she would take public transportation to Hannibal’s office, and Will would fetch her from there.

Will tried not to just be the fun-time weekend dad. He wanted to be a support in Michelle’s life, stable and far more present than his own parents had been. It was difficult, however, when she was wriggling happily in his arms and babbling about all the things she wanted to do together. She was still so much smaller than her peers, but she was getting bigger. Soon, he wouldn’t be able to carry her at all.

Heading towards the car, his attention on Michelle, he nearly toppled a young woman over. She reached out a hand to steady him while Will was busy stammering apologies.

“I didn’t know Dr. Lecter worked with children,” She said, once she and Will were both safely balanced again.

“He doesn’t,” Will said shortly. It was entirely irrational, but he felt an urge to turn, to tuck his body between Michelle and prying eyes. Normally, Will would say there was nothing wrong with seeking therapy, that getting help did not make one a danger. But he had seen Hannibal’s brand of ‘help’ before. It made him wary, suspicious.

Michelle, well-taught to leave Tėtis’s patients alone, did not attempt to continue her chatter. She tucked her face into Will’s neck, hiding away from the stranger. “We need to be going,” Will told her, attempting to sound apologetic.

She stopped him in his tracks only a few steps later. “Are you famous, or are we friendly?”

“What?” This time, when Will turned back, he *did* keep Michelle out of sight, tilting his head just enough to get the woman in his view.

“You look familiar,” the woman explained, “So I’ve either met you, or seen you around enough to recognize you.”

“I’m the man who *didn’t* kill all those people,” Will said stiffly. The woman tilted her head to the side, looking thoroughly intrigued. It made Will nauseous. He hurried off before she could find the words to freeze him any further.

———

“I met Randall Tier today.”

Hannibal’s hand did not still where he stood, slicing thin strips of meat for tonight’s meal, but Will knew him too well, now.

“What have you done, Hannibal?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” Hannibal murmured. Not *quite* a lie. He had plausible deniability. After all, he hadn’t done anything *today.*

Will crossed the room, leaning with his back against the counter so he could catch Hannibal’s gaze. “I have three dead bodies and a suspect with a worrying wealth of knowledge about prehistoric predators. *You* have a preference for unconventional psychiatric practices and a history of excessive meddling. What. Did. You. Do?”

Hannibal set his knife aside and dipped each strip of flesh into the marinade, coating it thoroughly. “You’d need more than my word for a search warrant,” Hannibal reminded him, “And any evidence I gave you would be a violation of Doctor-patient confidentiality.”

Will eyed him, searching out the loopholes Hannibal left for him. “Off-record, then,” he said slowly, “Don’t help me catch him. Help me understand what might be coming for me.”

An interesting choice of words. Hannibal paused in his efforts with the meat. “He didn’t like you.”

Will laughed, dark and deep. “He despised me entirely.”

“But of course. You’ve been sent to catch him, and so far, you’ve never missed your mark.”

“That anyone knows about, anyway.”

“You caught the Chesapeake Ripper,” Hannibal mused with a wry smile, “After the way you brought Frederick Chilton in, it’s no wonder a much smaller fish is wary of your hook.”

“Frederick Chilton gave himself to me on a silver platter,” Will said with a look of disgust, “And failed entirely to prove his own innocence when he did it.”

“The evidence was overwhelming.”

“Yes, the picture *was* quite exquisitely painted.”

Hannibal would’ve liked to believe he wasn’t imagining the hint of admiration in Will’s eyes. Perhaps Hannibal’s tastes and aesthetics were not ones Will was yet ready to share, but he could still be impressed by a deft hand and a carefully executed plan. He loved his killers, in a way, understood them more intimately than anyone else could. And, by extension, knew Hannibal almost as well as Hannibal knew himself.

“Heat the oil in the pan, if you would, please.”

Will moved around him, accustomed, by now, to playing the part of Hannibal’s sous chef. And he was, indeed, a fisherman, patient enough to wait while Hannibal reorganized his thoughts to find what snippets of truth he could share.

“Randall Tier had a particular pathology, “ Hannibal began, “It *would* make him a potential candidate for your killer.”

———

Another of Hannibal’s patients found Will before Randall Tier did. Margot Verger pulled up into his driveway on a dark night, leaving tire tracks in fresh snow. Her car looked like it cost more than Will’s house. It was decidedly out of place in the middle of nothing but fields and forests. As out of place as Margot herself, looking up at Will where he stood on the porch.

“I don’t know if you remember me,” She said.

“I remember you. How did you find me?”

“I was right. You are famous.”

“And you aren’t?” Will looked her up and down, flatly unimpressed. He did poorly with company; even worse with ambushes. “What is the heir to the Verger meatpacking dynasty doing on my front lawn?”

“Oh, I’m not the heir,” Margot said with a shake of her head, “Wrong parts, wrong proclivity for parts. You’re thinking of my brother.”

“Alright,” Will said dryly, “What is the Verger *spare* doing on my front lawn.”

“Not even that,” Margot replied, not a hint of hurt on her face, “But to answer your question, I’m here for a character reference. Seeing as we both have a friend in common.”

“You want to know about Dr. Lecter.” It didn’t surprise Will. They were an exclusive club, Hannibal’s lost little strays. Two was enough, though. If any more found him, he and Hannibal were going to have to have a talk.

“Your trial was in the paper. You were his patient, and then you were sleeping with him.” Margot gave him a hard look, searching his face for twitches, clues.

“The two were mutually exclusive, I assure you,” Will drawled.

“And then you had… a falling out.”

She picked at his edges, searching for loose strings, but there was nothing malicious in her hunting. Curiosity, yes, but under that, Will saw a burning desire for connection. Understanding. We all want to be understood, in the end.

He invited her in, just to get out of the cold. They sipped whiskey by the fire, each searching the other for some kind of snippet of information.

“You were in therapy with Doctor Lecter,” Margot noted again.

“Not for very long.”

“And yet you know him well enough to be picking up his daughter. She was in the news, too.” Margot added, when Will’s hand tightened visibly around his glass of whiskey. “They left her name out, but it’s easy to put two and two together.”

“*Our* daughter,” Will said finally, “Doctor Lecter’s and mine. His first, but the split is… somewhat more equal now.”

Margot glanced around the living room. Will knew what she was seeking. Michelle’s things traveled back and forth with her. The upstairs was only slowly turning into a suitable bedroom for a child. The only sign that she ever came to Wolf Trap at all were the drawings on the fridge, out of Margot’s line of sight from where she sat. Margot turned clever eyes back on Will.

“And the split between Doctor Lecter and yourself?”

Will took another slow sip of whiskey. “Ask what you came here to ask, Margot.”

“I tried to murder my brother. Dr. Lecter had some interesting advice for that.”

Of course she did. She said it calmly, but with a challenge in her eyes. Daring Will to ask, to put up some sort of fuss.

“And what,” Will drawled, already knowing what the response would be, “did dear Doctor Lecter tell you?”

“If at first you don’t succeed, try try again.” Margot finished off her whiskey, no hint of delicateness about her. Here was a woman who was vicious, who would tear through you with her teeth, given the chance. She stared Will down, unyielding. He understood what Hannibal admired in her. Why he might have chosen her as one of his ducklings.

“You’re curious if Doctor Lecter gave any of his other patients similar advice.”

“Wouldn’t you be?” She smiled. She knew, without an answer. As he had. Will had a moment of tense panic, worry for Hannibal, but no. She wouldn’t do anything with the information. She had merely been seeking answers.

And besides, shouldn’t Will be hoping she would tell someone?

“Margot,” Will asked, “Your brother. Did he deserve it?”

———

Will had known Tier would come, eventually. Will had marked himself as a target simply by being on the case at all, by presenting himself as a threat to Tier’s freedom. Some animals didn’t do well in captivity.

But Tier’s other victims had been outside when he came for them, out in the open, easy to spot. Will had not expected Tier to come to his *home*.

The dogs heard him first, Buster yipping at the door. At first, Will thought he was asking to be let out, but once the door opened, he bolted, bounding through snow deeper than he was tall, disappearing into the woods.

“Shit,” Will swore, fetching his rifle from the closet he now kept it locked in. The other dogs watched him, curious, but obedient. Buster always had been the wild one.

“Stand guard,” Will told the rest, running after his wayward pet.

He knew when he found Buster, bleeding, yet abandoned. Not an animal hunting, no matter what Tier thought of himself. This was a fisherman, casting his bait.

The growl was too close, but a man, however fast, was still just a man. Will ran, Buster under his arm, Tier flat on his heels. The house was the safest place, and also the last place Will wanted to be. His car keys were still on the hook. With nowhere else to go, Will slammed through his front door, locking it as quickly as he could.

“Daddy?” A sleepy voice from the bottom of the stairs. Will’s chest tightened. He should have known. He should have seen this coming, and *never* brought her here.

“Go back to bed, Michelle!” He yelled.

“But I heard-“

“Now!” He’d never yelled at her like this. He heard a startled yelp, and then the uneven sound of tiny bare feet scrambling up the steps. “Lock the door!” He yelled after her and prayed that she listened.

Prayed that Tier had no interest in prey so small. That his motive was entirely personal and didn’t extend past Will himself.

“Stand guard,” He told the dogs, pointing towards the steps. He’d been practicing this with them, and though they hesitated, they quickly disappeared upstairs.

The house was quiet. Will stood in the center of the room and braced for impact.

———

Michelle stood just in front of the door, considering the lock. Daddy had said to lock it. Daddy had *never* told her to lock the door before. She wanted to go check on him, make sure he was okay and not having bad dreams again.

She had just made up her mind to do so, when somewhere downstairs, glass shattered. Something rolled across the floor, a series of loud slams that made Michelle jump back. She locked the door, fingers shaking.

So many sounds. The floorboards creaking, and thumps and thumps and thumps and the dogs whining outside her door. And thud. And thud and thud.

Silence.

Silence that stretched out for so long that it dug into her head and scraped at her ears and was so loud so *loud*-

Michelle fumbled with the lock, stumbling over dogs and down the stairs, skidding to a stop in the living room, because there was Daddy, standing and okay and-

“Don’t look!”

-Still yelling. Michelle squeezed her eyes shut tight, shivering in the breeze from the shattered window. Daddy picked her up, tucking her face into his shoulder.

“Keep your eyes shut until I tell you, okay?”

“Okay.”

Daddy carried her across the room, setting her down to help her clumsily into her boots and coat. She was still in her pajamas, but he zipped her up into her coat anyway, tugging her hat down over her ears.

“I want you to go to the car,” he said, tucking the keys into her hand, “The heat is already set up. You don’t need to worry about starting up the engine, just put the keys in and turn the key to the line that says ‘ON.’ That will get the heat on. You can sit up in the driver’s seat until I come get you, okay?”

“Are we going to the hospital?” Michelle asked, trying to sneak a peek at Daddy. He pulled her hat down over her eyes.

“No, honey, no one is going to the hospital. But I need to talk to Tėtis, alright? We’ll go right home and get you tucked into bed, and in the morning, we’ll bug Tėtis until he makes the fancy crepes.”

“With strawberry syrup?”

“*And* whipped topping,” Daddy said, kissing the top of her head. “Now go. I’ll be right with you.”

He wasn’t *right* with her. He took a little bit longer than that, and Michelle was so very tired. She was dozing with her head against the window when a thump woke her, the sound of something heavy in the trunk and then the trunk slamming shut. Daddy came around to the front of the car to get her, buckling her into her booster seat while she shivered from the sudden burst of cold air.

“Daddy your window’s broke,” She said as they pulled away.

“I know, sweetheart, but I cleaned up the glass, so the dogs won’t get hurt and let them into your room to sleep. Tėtis and I will come back tomorrow morning to fix it up.”

“Why’s it broke, though?”

“Strong winds,” Daddy said, which didn’t sound right at all.

But then he turned on the music, a CD Tėtis had given him with the same songs they played in Tėtis’s car, and the heat and familiarity soon lulled her back to sleep.

———

Hannibal was a light sleeper to begin with, but also got by on much less than most people needed. He was still awake when he heard the front door slam open, though tucked into bed with a book. He pulled on his bathrobe and met Michelle at the top of the stairs, frowning at her exhausted face.

“Daddy says-“ she paused, yawned loudly, and then tried again, “Daddy says to tell you to get your ass downstairs right now, and I asked him if I could say the word and he said I could and you weren’t allowed to get mad as long as I went right to bed after and promised to never ever say it again. Even when I’m forty.”

Hannibal’s lip curled. He couldn’t very well discipline her when she’d been promised he wouldn’t, but he and Will were going to need to have a *discussion* about what sort of words were appropriate to use around a *child*.

It wouldn't be happening tonight, though. Michelle slipped past him and into her room, closing the door behind her, and Hannibal was left wondering why on earth Will had brought her home in the middle of the night. He'd never ended a visit early before, and in fact had more than once bartered a few extra hours.

He found Will in the dining room, knuckles bruised and bloodied, a cut smearing blood across his forehead. And Randall Tier, thoroughly mangled, sprawled across the table.

"Your ducklings keep finding their way back to the nest, Hannibal." Will's eyes were still wild with the rush of adrenaline, even after the long drive.

Hannibal had always wondered what it would be like if the fledglings he pushed out of the nest happened to find one another. He'd imagined it going very much like this, though in his flights of fancy, never had it happened quite so close to home.

"Did she see?" He asked quietly. Michelle had shied away when Hannibal had removed Abigail's ear, but in the time since then she had become curious about her parents' work. She'd been utterly fascinated by the preparations of Abel Gideon's leg.

But all that, carefully presented to her by Hannibal in small bites that she could manage, one at a time, was a far cry from watching her father beat a man to death with his bare hands.

"She was upstairs," Will assured him, "And I carried her through the living room and put her in the car while I took care of the body."

Will kept the table between them, staring Hannibal down with a heat in his eyes that bore through Hannibal, the doubt and mistrust between them bringing itself back to the forefront of their conversations.

"Will," Hannibal said slowly, "Will, I would *never*-"

"I know," Will said, but though he sounded sincere, the tension didn't leave his frame. "You wouldn't put Michelle at risk like that. Just as I wouldn't. And yet, through your machinations, once again I find myself twisted and reshaped at your hand."

"Any conversations I had with Randall Tier were long before I ever met you."

"And yet the consequences ripple out into my life." Will slammed his fist down on the table, his eyes dropping down to the body, the open, cold eyes.

"Will," Hannibal prodded gently, "How did it feel?"

Will glanced up at him, a sharp glare shaping his features. "You know how it felt," he growled.

Hannibal stepped forward, circling the table in slow, cautious steps, as though approaching a feral animal backed into a corner. Will bared his teeth.

"Was it as good as killing me would have felt?"

Will's sharp intake of breath was as good as a moan, the heat in his eyes more akin to desire than disgust. "No," he said, his voice a whisper, "Killing you would be both infinitely *more,* and the worst decision I'd ever made. You knew that before you asked."

Hannibal reached for Will's hand, ran a thumb over the bloodied knuckles.

"And you," Will told him, "You would consume me entirely, if you could. And long to undo it with every bite."

"I suspect I would never get over the breaking of that particular teacup. Will, let me bandage you."

"No." Will's eyes were dark, pupils blown wide. His pulse was still thrumming with the rush that came with the taking of a life. He was entirely beautiful, ethereal. Hannibal would have him so excited every day, given the chance.

His hand was calloused, when he turned it over and grabbed for Hannibal's wrist. Another hand cupping his jaw.

And then they were kissing, soft only for a minute before Will growled and shoved him back, pinning him up against the wall with hands that wandered and tugged and pulled.

There was no room on the table, and Will was far too exhausted to be Hannibal's sole support. They ended up in the family room, clothes strewn through the hallway.

"I don't have anything," Hannibal whispered.

"We don't need it," Will said, and pinned him to the sofa.

It was like falling into a memory. Hannibal half-feared he'd wake to find he'd been dreaming. Hand's grasping, relearning places that had gone so long without touch.

"I'm still angry," Will mouthed into his shoulder.

"There's beauty in rage," Hannibal said, pulling him back up into a kiss.

There had been nights, before, where they had spent hours, teasing out pleasures and seeking new intimacies. This was not such a night. They took each other in hand, hips rolling, backs arching. Will left sharp indents of his teeth against Hannibal's shoulders, his chest. He drew blood at the curve of Hannibal's throat, and Hannibal licked it from his teeth and drew scratches down his back.

It ended as it began, with hands seeking hands, fingers wrapped around a wrist, drawing each other close until heat and need spilled over.

Hannibal braced himself for the backlash. For the disgust. For the panic Will had felt the last time they had touched.

And then Will pressed a smile to his lips. Small, tentative, but a smile.

“You’re not forgiven,” he told Hannibal, “I don’t know if I- But this is what it is. There’s no undoing what we were. What we are.”

“I love you, Will.”

Will’s smile bore the brunt of pain, uncertainty, but he did not draw back. He wiped them both down with his boxers and then settled himself over Hannibal, chest to chest, his face in Hannibal’s neck. Hannibal wrapped his arms around him, grateful for the chance.

“I know you do,” Will finally replied, “I’m just trying to believe it.”

Chapter End Notes

Also known as 'the one where Will gives the fuck up and has his Season 3 'oh god we are addicted to each other' revelation a lot sooner.'

I know several people will be disappointed because they were hoping for Hannibal to suffer more. Well. Season's not over yet.

Will is dealing with a lot right now. He loved Hannibal before all the shit went down, and that's hard for him to put behind him. Especially when he thought Hannibal was a psychopath, but now Hannibal is showing genuine remorse and regret for what he did. Will knows Hannibal loves him, instead of thinking this was all a game to him, and that changes things a bit.

"But how can he forgive Hannibal for Abigail and Beverly???" man, I have NEVER been able to answer that one, but at least it's canon so you aren't allowed to be mad at ME for it.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Less Michelle this time around, because the grownups were all talking.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A warm cloth over his eyes, a broad chest at his back. Will drifted.

Hannibal washed him with gentle hands: first his bloody knuckles and then the rest of him, careful and slow.

“I can bathe myself, you know,” Will murmured. Hannibal’s lips brushed his neck, soft, cautious.

“Allow me the opportunity,” Hannibal said. “It’s been so lacking in these past few months.”

“And whose fault is that?”

Hannibal’s hand came to rest low on Will’s stomach, tugging him ever closer until it seemed they were one being. “Entirely mine,” He said. His voice was low, tight with sentiment that Will would never have expected to find in him. “I have created a frailty in your trust that I regret deeply. Let me repair it. Stay with me.”

Will tilted his head back until cracks of light slipped in under the edges of the washcloth. “Where else would I go?”

“Away,” Hannibal suggested, “Into the quiet of the stream that twists through your mind. I would have you here in mind, as well as body, Will. I have no desire for the physical without the man within.”

“Always so wordy,” Will said with a quiet laugh, “two dozen words when just three would do.”

Hannibal nosed up under his ear, tucking the words into that soft, sensitive patch of skin. “I love you.”

Will sighed, tilting his head to expose more of his throat. “After all of this, you’d better.”

———

Hannibal slept with an enviable ease. They’d agreed to deal with the body tomorrow-- neither wanting to disturb Michelle’s sleep any further than it had been already-- and had crawled into bed still damp from the bath, seeking out each other’s warmth.

Hannibal wrapped around him like an octopus, or a child clutching to a much-loved toy. Will suspected that should he attempt to disentangle himself Hannibal's grip would only tighten.

It was so easy for him, to slip into Will's space, to pull Will to him and tuck his nose against Will's curls. He'd slept readily, and Will… Will had yet to sleep at all.

Hannibal loved him. It was an unavoidable fact of the universe. As sure as the sky was blue, as water was wet, Hannibal loved him. Fierce and fond, possibly as much as Hannibal could love anyone, or anything. Where once Will had thought the Ripper a monster, cold and cruel, he now saw only Hannibal. Father, lover. Will's chest ached.

Hannibal's love for him erased nothing of what he'd done. Of what he no doubt *would do*, in the future. Will was not fool enough to think Hannibal might stop for his sake, when he hadn't stopped for Michelle's. The Ripper would kill again, and again. He would glut himself on half of Maryland, if not stopped, and it was Will's job to stop him. Will's job to hunt him down and lock him away.

But if Hannibal's love for Will could be so visceral and true, what of Will's love for Hannibal? He saw it now, in himself, a fire of want and need, a desire that sought only one thing to sate it.

He would ache without Hannibal. The small fragment of hope he'd managed to build around their little family would shatter, and Will would be lonely and isolated once more.

But he could look himself in the eye, at least, and know he'd done the right thing. The right thing for Baltimore, for Maryland, for the whole damn world.

The right thing for Michelle? She would never understand. All she would see was another source of abandonment, another parent stolen from her. It would break her.

They would be two fragmented, broken things, and god only knew what isolation and captivity would do to *Hannibal*, who was eccentric and vibrant, and meant to be among people.

"You think very loudly," Hannibal murmured, drawing Will closer to his chest. Will closed his eyes, avoiding his gaze.

"It's been a hell of a night."

"Then perhaps contemplation can wait until morning?"

Will ducked his head, hiding a smile against Hannibal's collarbone. Nothing would have changed by morning. There would still be a body in the basement. Hannibal would still be the Chesapeake Ripper. They would still be lovers and parents, and Will would still have a choice to make.

But all of that would be the same in the morning.

"Yeah, sorry."

“Don’t apologize,” Hannibal said, tucking his face into Will’s curls. “Not to me.”

———

“You can’t bring your kid to this one,” Jack had warned when they arrived at the museum.

“She’s at school,” Will had said. He’d insured it. Whatever madness had overtaken him, it wouldn’t touch Michelle.

And it had, indeed, overtaken him.

Will was exhilarated. Exalted. They’d kept Randall Tier on ice for a few days while they planned his transformation. While Will called Jack and Jack reluctantly agreed to turn self-defense into another trap for Hannibal.

While Will considered, and reconsidered, and came to a conclusion.

He could not see Hannibal behind bars. Nor could he himself return to prison. But as things were, there were no alternatives. No backdoors, no escapes.

He’d told Hannibal no more lies, but Jack would not allow Will to waltz quietly into retirement, not with Hannibal still free. Jack would seek to trap Hannibal for as long as Hannibal remained within reach.

And so, when Randall had been left for the opening staff to find, and he and Hannibal had tucked themselves into bed, Will had made his next move.

“We should take a trip,” he’d whispered. “The three of us.”

In the dark, Hannibal’s eyes had glinted. Suspicion had been bred into them both. “Michelle has several weeks yet before Spring Break.”

“Maybe it’s time to revisit her educational path. There are other schools.”

“There are,” Hannibal had agreed, his voice slow and questioning. “A long trip, then?”

Will’s heart had pounded, a heavy, unsettling beat. “We could use a break from nosy neighbors.”

“Perhaps we’ll take the dogs with us,” Hannibal had said. “They are, after all, part of the family.”

Another painful skip of Will’s heart. “It could be a long time before we returned. Someone might need to watch the house.”

“I’ll make the necessary arrangements.”

“Does Michelle have a passport?”

Hannibal had pulled him in, nose tucked into Will's curls. "I'll make sure everyone's documents are up to date It may take a few weeks. Do you have a preference?"

"How's Michelle's Italian?"

"Adequate enough to show her Florence."

The plan was set. The body was displayed. All Will had to do was look Jack and Hannibal in the eyes and lie for a few weeks.

Simple.

———

Tėtis was humming. He didn't hum very often, but when he did, it was going to be a good day.

Daddy had already gone, before Michelle had even gotten out of bed. He had work way earlier than Tėtis did, and sometimes he had to go take care of the dogs even earlier than *that*.

Michelle liked that Daddy was around again, and that maybe he was going to move in, and they could all live together like they were supposed to, but it was still nice to have a morning with just Tėtis. He hummed while he made breakfast, and he smiled at her like he was happy-happy and not fake-happy.

"Can Abigail come to my birthday party?"

The smile dropped. Michelle kicked her feet at the kitchen island, swinging them back and forth from her stool.

"It's not *fair*," she said loudly. "Daddy's here all the time, now. Why can't Abigail come home?"

"Patience," Tėtis said.

"I don't *wanna* have patience!" Michelle yelled.

Tėtis turned to face her, his face all scrunched up in a Bad Face, in a Trouble Face. Angry-disappointed-hurt-irritated all looked the same to Michelle, but she knew 'In Trouble, Young Lady,' very well.

"It's not fair," she repeated, softer this time. "Abigail wants to come home."

Tėtis turned off the burner and set his pan to the side. He gave a great sigh, like being very, very tired.

"Everybody wants Abigail to come home," he said, his voice quiet and steady. "And when the time is right, she will."

“But it’s my *birthday*,” Michelle said, and now *her* face scrunched up, all wet and puffy. Tėtis scooped her up with a small grunt, bouncing her in his arms like he had when she first came home.

“Next year,” he promised, “you will have a big party. Everyone you love will be there. Myself, Abigail, your Daddy. All the dogs. We’ll have a dinner party in Italy.”

Michelle giggled. “Daddy doesn’t speak Italian,” she pointed out.

“Neither do the dogs,” Tėtis said, “So we will have to teach them.”

———

Will had agreed to interview with Freddie on Hannibal’s behalf, and he regretted it a little bit more with every passing second.

Freddie Lounds was obnoxious, and confident in it. She wielded irritability like a sword, slicing through defenses with a smarmy smile and a too-knowing question.

She did not believe Fredrick Chilton was the Ripper, and therein lied the problem.

“You lived trapped within his walls for, what, nearly six months?” she said, examining her perfectly manicured nails. “And yet you never even turned your head his way.”

“Doctor Chilton was in a unique position,” Will said carefully. “He had the time and the resources to hide himself.”

“In between all that personal, one-on-one therapy?” Freddie asked. “The therapeutic relationship is such an… *intimate* one.”

“And one that Doctor Chilton was happy to take advantage of. You’ll recall, of course, that before his unfortunate escape, Able Gideon was the victim of Doctor Chilton’s so-called intimacy.”

A hint of a frown tugged at Freddie’s lips. To ask Will about his time in Chilton’s care, to ask if he’d suffered the same intimacies, would be to paint Will in a far more sympathetic light than she clearly wanted to.

Switching gears, Freddie straightened up, offering Will a smile that might have been meant to be reassuring.

“For a while, you were convinced that *Hannibal Lecter* was the Chesapeake Ripper,” she said, drawing out the syllables of Hannibal’s name. “Absolutely *certain*. And yet now, I see, you’ve resumed your therapeutic relationship.”

“I was mistaken,” Will said stiffly. “I am not infallible.”

“Hmmm, I suppose no one is. Although I took the liberty of going through some of your old cases. You have quite the track record.”

“Everyone is wrong at some point in their live. Particularly when their brain is lit up like a Christmas tree.”

Freddie acknowledged that with a hum. “Yes, your encephalitis. I hear that Doctor Lecter was your most ardent supporter during that time.”

When he was done watching to see what happened. Will stamped down that sudden flash of bitterness.

“It must be so difficult, to feel like a lover has betrayed you,” Freddie continued. “But I suppose you’ve patched all that up, and he’s forgiven you for your accusations. Water under the bridge.”

“We know where we stand with each other.”

“Yes. You’re co-parenting, aren’t you?”

“No.” Will rose from his seat, ignoring the look of displeasure Freddie sent him.

“It’s an odd situation,” she prodded, “raising a child with a man who accused you of murder. Raising a child with a man who you believed was a murderer. You, raising a child, in general.”

“I don’t care what you put in the article,” Will told her. “You were going to make up half of it anyway. But keep Michelle’s name out of it.”

“The people have a right to know-“

“Sate your curiosity somewhere else.” Will grabbed for his coat. Freddie was never going to write the article he needed her to. He had no desire to drag Michelle down through the mud along with him.

——

Will looked more at home in Hannibal’s preferred indoor market than he did most places, but there was still a sense of discomfort about him, as though he’d ended up here entirely by accident and had not yet figured out a way to excuse himself.

Still he looked a far sight better than he would have under the fluorescent lights of the Food Lion or some other such nonsense. Hannibal was pleased to have his company.

Michelle flittered about, as she always did, hindered little by her leg when there was something she was excited to see. She knew not to wander far, and Hannibal left her to her explorations as he and Will inspected the vegetable choices.

“Expensive,” Will mused. “Would’ve been cheaper at the Giant.”

“It’s winter,” Hannibal reminded him. “The supermarkets typically import their produce around this time. Most of these were locally grown in greenhouses, whenever possible, although I know a few stalls that import from relatives.”

“The supermarket would have a broader selection.”

“But not *better*,” Hannibal insisted, adding a handful of spring onions to his overflowing basket.

Will watched him with an intent gaze. Hannibal could feel the argument lurking just under his skin, a frustration waiting to burst forth. He moved on to the eggs.

“Small party,” Will finally said. “You mentioned Alana declined the invitation?”

“Alana has asked for some time apart, to mend herself. She has promised that in a few weeks’ time she’ll be more recovered, but the party was a bit too soon for her.” Hannibal caught Will’s gaze out of the corner of his eye. “I was given the impression that she was more upset with herself, than with me.”

Will glared down at the tiled floor. He’d found a chip, and he worried at it with the toe of his shoe until Hannibal was quite certain he’d lift the entire square. “Alana doesn’t need my forgiveness,” he said. “She wasn’t the one who owed me commitment.”

Hannibal took in a slow breath. It was over, Will had sworn it was. He had asked that Hannibal not try to talk any more about it, and Hannibal wouldn’t. “Be that as it may, I think she would appreciate it.” He’d pushed too far. Will looked up at him with a raised eyebrow.

“Alright, *Tėtis*,” he drawled.

“Your affairs with Alana are your own,” Hannibal deflected, “I don’t mean to intrude.

Will muttered something about *Hannibal’s* affairs, which Hannibal decided not to decipher. Will stalked past him to glower at some flowers.

“Just the three of us, then?” He muttered. “You, me, Michelle. Not much of a party.”

“She had asked if we might invite Phyllis but changed her mind when I suggested we might also have to invite Jack.”

Will barked out a laugh. “She’ll never forgive him.”

“Such a shame.”

“Still. She’s turning nine, not two. These are the years she’ll remember.”

Hannibal watched Will carefully. Will reached out, trailing the tip of his finger over the petals of a tulip. “Last year’s was better,” Will said, tilting to shoot Hannibal a look.

There was the argument, the bitterness. Such an inopportune time for it, but perhaps Will liked Hannibal better when he was flat-footed, unable to properly defend himself. Hannibal could not entirely blame him for that.

“If I could have everyone return for this year’s party, I would,” Hannibal said simply. Will’s eyes narrowed.

“Would you?”

“I wonder,” Hannibal murmured, picking carefully through his basket for a final check, “If that is something you’ll ever be able to forgive me for.”

A moment of quiet contemplation. “I wonder,” Will murmured in response, “If it is ever something for which you’ll deserve forgiveness.”

———

In the end, what Michelle wanted for her birthday was dinner and dogs. Hannibal looked just a bit sad as he tucked her into the backseat of Will’s car. Will struggled with a sudden urge to console him, though he’d been the one to insist Michelle and Will have some one-on-one time.

“We’ll be back bright and early for breakfast crepes,” he said, pressing a kiss to the corner of Hannibal’s mouth. “You know she’ll want you to make that strawberry jam thing, and I have no idea how to do that. She hates my pancakes.”

“Because you undercook them.”

“They’re better gooey,” Will insisted with a smile.

They’d all eaten macaroni and cheese together, but once they were safely tucked in front of the fire with the dogs, Will made her popcorn as well. They pelted each other with it until Michelle was gasping through her giggles and all of the dogs had cemented her as their favorite human.

Her bedroom was coming along. Hannibal had helped Will pick out curtains and a better shade of paint to replace the crumbling grandma wallpaper. Michelle had started keeping a small selection of toys in Wolf Trap, and she dragged the entire box up into bed with her.

“No,” Will said, grabbing a handful of toy food and shoving it back into the box. He replaced it with a stuffed tiger and kissed her cheeks until she stopped pouting. “Dogs or no dogs?”

Michelle hummed thoughtfully. She loved snuggling with them, but they’d learned that she was a volatile sleeper, and hated being compressed. “No dogs,” She finally said mournfully. Will shut the door behind him.

He hadn’t set her to bed all that early, but it was still nearly an hour later when the car rolled up in the drive. Will met Margot Verger on his porch, one eyebrow raised. She gave him the same look, holding up a bottle of whiskey.

Later, belly warmed and curiosity peaked, Will allowed Margot to prod at his walls.

“What happened to your window?”

“A stag got lost in the storm,” He said. “Barreled right through. Nearly took the dogs out in his panic.” She took that lie, weighed it in her head, and then accepted it as the best he would offer her. Smart woman.

“Are you scarred?” Margot asked. She leaned forward, legs crossed at the knee, blouse loose at the chest.

Margot was an expert in holding two conversations at once. Will wondered if Hannibal had taught her that, or if it was a technique she’d perfected on her own.

“More than I can probably know,” Will allowed.

“I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.”

Margot had not been subtle in her intentions-- though Will had yet to suss out the purpose-- but he was surprised to hear her so brazen. “I don’t have the right parts for your proclivities, Margot.”

“It’s not about proclivities,” she said. “It’s about trust.”

“And you trust me?”

“My level of trust is usually zero,” she said. “Congratulations. You’ve made an exception of yourself. “

“Drinking alone with me, at night, in my house,” Will murmured. “I suppose there’d need to be some trust there.”

“Stories of your crimes were greatly exaggerated,” Margot said. Her fingers tapped at the buttons of her blouse.

There was a crossroads before Will. A choice he was nearly chomping at the bit to make.

Despite forgiveness, despite the tentative thing being rebuilt between them, something in Will still ached to hurt Hannibal. To show him, to cut him down just a notch or two.

This was Will’s by *right*. He had earned it, through tears and rage and betrayal. Should he take Margot to bed, Hannibal had no right to say a thing about it.

But Will had sworn to make an attempt, to give Hannibal what he could. And their daughter was upstairs, asleep in the room they’d built for her, together.

Will reached out and topped up Margot’s glass. “Have a drink, Margot,” he said gently. “Talk, if you’d like to. Or we could sit here, in silence and mutual respect.”

Margot gave him a calculating look. Perhaps debating her chances if she tried again. Perhaps just deciphering his response, his intent.

Slowly, she raised the glass to her lips.

———

“I tried to sleep with one of your patients,” Margot said. “Will Graham.”

She was watching Hannibal with sharp eyes. He wondered if she had looked that way at Will, while she was propositioning him, or if she had merely put on a veil of flirtation.

A flicker of jealousy fluttered in Hannibal's belly. It startled him; he had not been aware he *could* be jealous, not over such a simple, nonexistent thing. She had, after all, said *'tried.'*

"Will Graham is not a lesbian," Hannibal pointed out.

"Maybe that was why he turned me down," Margot mused. "Damn."

"Will Graham is also not my patient."

Margot showed no hint of surprise. She leaned against the window, peering out into the streets. "He was, before."

"For perhaps a single session. No pesky ethical violations here, I assure you. You are as safe with me as you have ever been."

Margot must have had a beautiful smile, under all the layers of armor. The one she showed to Hannibal had fangs.

"A lesbian wouldn't have given me what I needed," she said.

Hannibal nodded, making a note on his pad. "Was Will aware of your intention to get pregnant?" There is a thought in his head, a tiny, ridiculous notion, that perhaps if he had been, they would be having an entirely different conversation.

But surely Michelle was enough for Will.

"Wasn't that *your* intention?" Margot asked.

"We often feel a great urge towards creating life when faced with death," Hannibal deflected. Margot nodded, either appeased or having confirmed her suspicions.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "It would have been better, if it had been him, but in the end, someone else will do the job just as well."

Hannibal tilted his head. "Did you have someone in mind?"

"I will." She sighed. "It's not about the money. Well, it is, but it's not *only* about the money. I think I'd make a good mother."

"I'm sure you would," Hannibal agreed, "and yet, the specificities of your father's will cannot be ignored."

"If I had a son," Margot murmured, "*rightfully* mine…"

"Then your brother would have no hold on you. But if you had a daughter…"

Margot's eyes were vacant as she stared out the window. "Then I'd have someone else to look out for."

———

Alana's smile was too bright, too cheery, as she stepped into the door. She'd brought wine, deep, blood red.

Michelle had already been tucked into bed. She'd thrown an absolute fit upon being told Alana would come for dinner, and then followed it up with hysterical, gulping tears. Neither of them had known what to do with her. It had been, in Will's opinion, entirely faked, which had been the most alarming part of the whole thing. Michelle was not a particularly good liar, nor was she ever very inclined to try.

It had been Will who put her to bed, in the end. Hannibal had been at too much of a loss, giving Will a helpless look that would have been hilarious in any other situation.

"Alana had sleepovers here while you were away," Michelle whispered when Will leaned in to kiss her goodnight. She said it like a secret, eyes darting towards the hall.

"I know," Will said, brushing back a lock of fine hair that had escaped its braid. "Tėtis and I already talked about it."

Michelle's entire face scrunched up, her eyes nearly disappearing under the weight of her consternation. "Then why is she *here*?"

"Alana is our friend."

"She's not *my* friend," Michelle grumbled.

"You don't have to be friends with anyone you don't want to be," Will promised. "But Tėtis and I are going to be friends with her, and you have to accept that."

He could see her mulling that over, her brow furrowed, and her lips drawn into a pout. Will kissed the bridge of her nose. "Think about it," he said. "We can talk more about it tomorrow."

Downstairs, Alana and Hannibal were sitting at a distance so precise it was obvious Alana had spent time calculating it. Too far apart, and she would be calling attention to the distance. Too close, and Will might think something more was going on. Her smile had a slightly tense quality to it.

Hannibal, on the other hand, was sipping wine as if it was any other Tuesday. Will tried not to roll his eyes.

"Have a seat, Will," Hannibal suggested. "Alana has brought a Cabernet that pairs wonderfully with the pork."

Alana tried to look flattered and failed. Most of her expressions shared that pinched, uncomfortable look. Will was torn between reassuring her and enjoying the moment. He

blamed Hannibal, entirely, for both conducting the affair at all *and* manipulating Alana into it. Alana could not be expected to defend herself from Hannibal at his worse. But there was still a tiny, petty part of him that wanted to make each of them squirm, at least for a night, and Hannibal had already had his turn.

“Will,” Alana said warmly, as Will settled in at Hannibal’s right hand. “You look well.”

“It’s amazing what access to sunlight can do for a person,” Will said, just to watch her flinch.

Dinner was an awkward affair. Alana kept attempting to start stilted small talk, which Will countered with unpracticed clumsiness, all the while Hannibal smirked away as if he was not seated at a table with his lover and his mistress. Ass.

“I’m glad the two of you were able to work things out,” Alana said quietly. “I worried that…”

“We are *uniquely* suited to understanding each other,” Will said, just as quiet.

Alana looked between the both of them, her brow furrowed. Though it went unsaid, the thought was clear; *she* didn’t understand *either* of them, and it frustrated her.

“Freddie Lounds would agree,” she said finally.

“Been giving interviews, Alana?” Will asked.

“Any conversation with Freddie is an interview,” Alana said, “Whether you want it to be or not. Freddie has no boundaries.”

“A person without boundaries is either a psychopath or a journalist,” Will quipped. “Freddie is both.”

“And, having exhausted her resources with Will, she seeks out those close to him,” Hannibal added. It was aimed to flatter, and Will could see the flicker of yearning in Alana’s eyes. She wanted closeness, but she could feel the barriers Will had put up.

“She thinks she sees something in the two of you no one else sees,” Alana prodded.”

“Freddie thinks very highly of herself,” Will said.

“Self-confidence is a good thing,” Hannibal mused.

Alana took another gulp of her wine. Frustration, or liquid courage, Will wasn’t sure. “Is libel?” she asked.

Will glanced at Hannibal. His expression had not changed, but there was a look in his eyes Will recognized. Curiosity.

Emboldened, Alana pushed forward. “Freddie thinks that neither of you are the killer she’s writing about,” she said. “But that together, you might be.”

“You must have bored her,” Hannibal said to Will, “if she’s already resorting to fiction.”

Will leaned back in his chair. “Fredrick refused to see her,” he told him.

“I imagine talking is painful for him, at the moment.” Hannibal took another sip of his wine. Will wondered what it said about him, that he could tell when Hannibal was smirking even though Hannibal’s lips had not so much as twitched.

“Freddie could make both your lives very difficult,” Alana pressed.

“The worst thing that could happen to me already did,” Will drawled. “Freddie doesn’t frighten me.”

Later, Hannibal cleared the table and left Will and Alana alone with their wine, accompanied by the distant sound of the sink.

“You once asked me to stay away from Hannibal,” Alana said softly. “At the time, I thought it was… because of what we’d done.” She looked up at him, eyes wide. Concerned.

“And now?”

Alana looked towards the kitchen. There was doubt in her eyes. She stood on that razor thin edge. Just a push, in either direction.

“Alana,” Will said, voice gentle as he could make it. “I trust Hannibal with my child.”

That he trusted Hannibal with absolutely no one else could go unspoken.

Alana looked at him, her head tilted, her blue eyes filled with such a warmth that Will’s stomach twisted. “Sometimes it’s hard to understand where you are with each other,” she said.

“We know where we are with each other. Shouldn’t that be enough?”

He’d hurt her, or perhaps she’d hurt herself. Alana smiled at him, achingly sad. “I wish I understood you better.”

Will offered her the closest thing to appreciation he could. “It’s enough that you’re trying.”

Too little, too late.

———

Jack was a fast driver, but that still left plenty of time for Will and Freddie to sit quietly, appraising each other. She sat on the couch with her legs crossed, her eyes narrowed. Will supposed he couldn’t blame her, given his approach. And that he was sitting in the chair next to the door.

“I’ll pay for the window,” he said awkwardly.

“Will you pay for the *therapy*?” She grumbled. After a moment, she added, “On second thought, don’t. I don’t trust your taste.”

It was taste that was the problem—god, Hannibal was infecting Will with his terrible jokes. If Freddie wanted to, she could ruin Will with what she'd found in his shed. Maybe she still would. That she was willing to wait for Jack to arrive and explain showed a level of respect Will was surprised she was capable of.

Will glanced towards the recently repaired Window. "I uh… I'm sorry if I hurt-"

"The *only* reason I am sitting here right now," Freddie interrupted, "is because, god help me, I think you might actually give a shit about Abigail Hobbs."

Will blinked. "Where was all this faith when I was on the stand?"

To her credit, Freddie paled a little. She too looked towards the window, out across the snowy fields. "The evidence against you was convincing," She said stiffly, "but obviously, we now know the Chesapeake Ripper shoved an ear down your throat. Presumably during one of your *many* illicit therapy sessions that an ethics board would have an orgasm over."

"Hannibal-"

"Dr. Bloom told me what you're like with the kid," Freddie said quietly. Her gaze was piercing when she turned back to him. "If nothing else, you care about her. And you cared about Abigail. And for that, and that *alone*, I will listen to whatever batshit crazy scheme Jack Crawford has cooked up."

Will accepted that in silence. After a moment, he stood and poured them each a few fingers of whiskey. They were still nursing them when Jack Crawford finally barreled in.

"Hannibal Lecter is the Chesapeake Ripper."

Freddie gave him a wry look, glancing towards Will as if to say, 'can you believe this idiot?'

"No shit, Sherlock," she said, downing the last of her whiskey. "What about the Bride of Chucky, over here?"

She did not look impressed by Jack's explanation, her face scrunched up as he described how Will was merely deceiving Hannibal, for Michelle's sake, for the good of the country, and so on and so forth. She and Will gave each other matching blank stares, cool, collected.

Despite how Will despised her, she was, quite possibly, one of the smartest people he knew. If anyone was a threat, it was Freddie, and perhaps that was why Jack had latched onto her so quickly. After all, his dislike of her was well known, and her threat to Hannibal would be obvious. To kill her would be the best of courting gifts. To *lie* about killing her would be the worst of betrayals.

"This is a stupid idea, Jack," Will said.

"You mutilated a corpse for date night, you don't get to tell me what ideas are stupid."

Freddie looked at Will with a spark of interest. "Yes, and how *was* date night, Will?"

“It’s not an interview,” Will snapped.

“Not yet,” Jack said, instantly ready to smooth things over. “Think about it, Freddie. Think about the autobiographical article, if you were the journalist who helped capture the Chesapeake Ripper. Think about the headlines.”

“Jack,” Will said, watching the calculating look on Freddie’s face.

“If you help us,” Jack said. “You get exclusive interview rights. To me, to Will. To Lecter, if I can swing it, and I’m pretty sure I can.”

To Will’s horror, Freddie smiled.

———

Will showed up late for dinner. He looked exhausted, bedraggled. The parcel in his hands, wrapped in butcher paper, looked limp, as if he’d tried to strangle it. Hannibal ushered him in the door, freeing him from his coat. Will led him into the kitchen, pausing by the island.

“A gift,” he said, each word ground out as if it pained him. “From Jack Crawford.”

Hannibal gently freed the parcel from Will’s grasp, unwrapping it to reveal what might once have been a perfect cut of loin.

“I’m supposed to tell you it’s Freddie Lounds,” Will spat out, and then he sank to the floor, as though all his strings had been cut, and buried his face in his knees.

Chapter End Notes

We have entered into the part of the series in which VERY LITTLE changes because these parts need to happen in order for later events to happen, so bear with me.

But some of those little changes are gonna have some decent ripples in the future, so we shall see.

Also poor baby really loved her birthday dinner with her Daddy and her Tetis but she DESERVES A PARTY and I'm SAD.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

> warnings for mason being mason, including the canonical abuse he inflicted on Margot. Author's notes at the end are important.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal poured them both generous helpings of wine. They settled into the family room, chairs pulled close to the fire. Will's eyes tracked the flickering flames, following the tendrils until his gaze began to blur.

"I feel as if I'm clawing my way out from the belly of the beast," he said softly. "Bloodied, tainted."

"A rebirth," Hannibal suggested.

"Or a damnation," Will countered. "There is no part of me that has not been touched, altered."

He heard the soft swish of fluid as Hannibal swirled his glass, loud in the silence that stretched between them.

"Do you feel regretful, Will?"

"Regret would imply a level of guilt about the past," Will told him. "I've lost my ability to reflect on the past. I am living entirely in the present, hurtling through time from one moment to the next."

"Our pasts can be painful," Hannibal said, "but they are fundamental in our creation."

"If I look too closely at what's become of me, I'll go mad." Will's voice dropped into a whisper. There it was, that secret shame. That fear that he was losing his mind entirely, and that soon there would be nothing left of Will Graham.

Because this, what he shared with Hannibal… He did not know how to describe it. There was something about the work they created that clung to Will. In some macabre way, the death and subsequent honoring of Randall Tier had brought Will joy. He *liked* it. He *loved* it.

What did that say about him? He didn't want to know. Life was easier if he could put introspection in a box and tuck it away on a shelf. If he could just keep living in two worlds, at home with Hannibal and Michelle, at work with Jack.

If nothing else, you care about her, Freddie had said, *and you cared about Abigail.*

Did he?

Could Will honestly say he cared about either of them?

Abigail was dead. Hannibal had murdered her—and Will had no way of knowing how he'd gone about it. Had he been quick? As gentle as possible, given the situation? Had Abigail had time to fear, to panic?

Worse, Cassie Boyle lingered in Will's mind. Her lungs had been ripped out while she was still breathing, for no other reason than that Hannibal could.

Will liked to think that Hannibal's fondness for Abigail would have prevented him from hurting her in such a way, but his fondness for her hadn't prevented him from killing her. Hannibal did what he did, regardless of emotional attachments. It wasn't that he didn't have any, it was that they didn't outweigh his desires. He could feel as much fondness for Abigail as Will did, and still use her to further his own needs.

What did that mean for Michelle?

Could he truly love Michelle if this was how he would allow her to be raised? With monsters lurking just out of sight.

But she was *loved*, she was so very loved. Happy, well-cared for.

Will felt nauseous justifying it to himself.

A hand touched his. Hannibal crouched before him, his eyes bright and knowing.

"Whatever valley your life takes you through, Will, I will be there at your side."

Will wondered if he knew exactly how much worse that made everything.

———

They got through that night, somehow. And the next. Will was still feeling weary when he finally returned home, his dogs happy to see him instead of a hired hand.

"Soon," he said, swallowing thickly around the word as he crouched down among them. "Soon we'll all be together. You'll love Europe. It'll be an adventure."

His words sounded hollow even to his own ears. *Europe*. Another country, another world, another *life*.

When all was said and done, would anything be left of Will Graham?

Will was still musing on it when Alana came to call, the distance between them a cavernous void where friendship had once been. Even mutual, professional respect seemed to have fled before anger and mistrust. Alana's gaze was hard when she stared at him.

"I wasn't aware we did friendly visits, still," Will said stiffly.

“This isn’t a friendly visit.”

“Just come to get a good look, then?”

“I’m trying to understand you,” Alana said. “To make sense of the pieces you’ve been laying out since you came back.”

“I’m not even sure we’re working on the same puzzle anymore, Alana.” Once, perhaps, that would have made hurt cross her face, twisted her expression into something painful. She didn’t even flinch.

Will didn’t feel hurt anymore, either. Only a hollow numbness.

“I don’t know why I’m here,” Alana admitted. “My feelings about you are… complicated.”

“We’re all complicated,” Will told her.

“You didn’t used to be. I used to think I understood you.”

“You didn’t.”

Alana blinked, and then sighed, shaking her head. “You aren’t who I thought you were, that much I know.”

“What do you think now, Alana?” He asked, even though he knew. “Are you wondering if I killed Freddie Lounds?”

“Did you?” She asked it so bluntly, her voice stiff and angry.

“What do you think?”

“I think that’s the wrong answer to give someone who’s already questioning your motivations.”

Will leaned against one of the posts on his porch, his arms folded across his chest. “If you think that’s something I’m capable of,” he said slowly, “why are you here alone?”

She flinched, her face twisting up. But she didn’t back away, didn’t turn back towards her car. “Because I was hoping I wasn’t entirely wrong about you.” She paused, taking a deep breath. “And because I’m worried. Worried *for you*, Will. Your relationship with Hannibal… You went from utter resentment to this, and the more time you spend with him, the more you-“

“My love life isn’t up for discussion,” Will said, cutting her off. “It never was.”

Alana looked at him, really looked. Will wasn’t sure what she saw, but whatever it was, it wasn’t enough to provoke her into further conversation. She gave Will a sharp nod.

“Fine,” she said, “do what you will. But be *careful*.”

“Where was all this carefulness when it was you?” Will asked. Alana’s shoulders inched up towards her ears.

“I will never stop being sorry for that,” she said softly, “and I will never ask for you to forgive it. But either cut me out or don’t, Will. Don’t hold friendship in one hand and a knife in the other.”

She left, then, and Will watched her go until her car was nothing more than a spot in the distance. Then he went inside and poured himself two fingers of whiskey.

———

They’re eating birds tonight.

Whole entire *birds*.

They were alive, when Tėtis brought them home, and then he’d drowned them. Michelle had watched with wide eyes.

She didn’t want to *eat* the birds, though. They had *bones* in them. They still had their *eyeballs*. Bones and eyeballs were gross, and not for eating. She’d said as much to Tėtis and been sent off to the family room to think about ‘appropriate ways to decline a meal.’

Michelle had eaten leftover pork instead, and then got to work on her favorite hobby.

There were times when she was meant to be eavesdropping, and times that she was not. This was one of the ‘not’ times. Tėtis said that everyone deserved privacy, and that he and Daddy needed to know that Michelle would respect that. And she did! Mostly.

But really, how many conversations did they need to be having without her? They were all a family. And Michelle was a big girl. She knew big girl things, like about Miss Beverly and where babies came from and how much blood needed to be poured over a kitchen floor to pretend someone was dead.

It was a lot of blood. She had not been allowed to touch it.

But that didn’t matter now. What mattered was that conversations were happening without her, and they didn’t really need to.

Tėtis was talking about euphoria. It was a big word. Michelle couldn’t remember if she’d heard it before.

“Was it euphoria you felt, when you killed Randall Tier?”

Michelle didn’t know who that was, but it nudged at something inside of her, something suspicious and wondering. This was why they weren’t talking in front of her. This was why Daddy looked at her funny and nudged her out of the room.

Everybody died, eventually. Sometimes people had to die because it was the only way to move forward. Michelle knew that well. Maybe Daddy didn’t yet, but he would.

“Killing Randall was… peaceful. There was adrenaline, but it was far off. Subdued.”

Killing Mommy hadn’t felt like anything. Killing her first Daddy hadn’t felt like anything, either.

Michelle could barely remember them, just a hazy, blurry outline when she prodded at her memories, but she remembered *that*. She remembered that blood stuck to her, that they’d never let her wear that dress again, that her hair had stained pink in places and needed to be thoroughly scrubbed.

Tėtis had asked her once if she had been angry. She hadn’t been. She wasn’t sure she knew how to be angry, back then, how to be anything except empty. She just remembered wanting them to *stop*.

Michelle closed her eyes and tilted her head back, leaning heavily against the wall. Had she been relieved? She couldn’t remember. ‘During’ had been too fast, too much happening, too much panicking. ‘After’ had been all about Tėtis and coming home.

She’d been relieved when The Man died, the one who’d come into Tėtis’s office with sharp strings, who’d killed Nina.

Nina. It had hurt when Nina died. It had been a big, stabbing, sudden hurt that went on and on and on.

But everything else, that had been...

Maybe Daddy was right. Maybe it had been peaceful.

———

Hannibal must admit to being somewhat impressed. Jack must be desperate. It was one thing to allow Will to mutilate the corpse of Randall Tier, another entirely to burn one *himself* and pass it off as Freddie Lounds. Of course, he would have known that Hannibal would recognize a fake.

Whose body was it? Who had allowed Jack to desecrate their loved one as part of his increasingly disturbing attempts to catch the Chesapeake Ripper?

Or perhaps Jack hadn’t asked at all. He seemed to have reached that stage, that peak of desperation. Between Hannibal’s kills, Bella’s illness, and Will’s sudden reluctance, poor Jack must have been falling apart at the seams.

He must have known that Will was no longer entirely on his side. Nor, Hannibal suspected, was Will on *his* side, though he was as close to it as Hannibal dared to hope for. Will was on Michelle’s side, first and foremost, the side that would make his life with her and with Hannibal the easiest to manage.

Hannibal was going to have to take a break from his preferred meats for a while, once the move was complete, to ease Will fully into their new life. It pained him that Will could not

simply accept things as they were, but the efforts Will was making were notable, and deserved both praise and reward.

And Hannibal had learned the hard way that he would rather have some of Will than none of him.

Will had a brilliant darkness to him, just waiting to be gently coaxed out. Hannibal was happy to take his time, so long as he had Will with him. So long as there were no more walls between them.

Well. There was the cliff house. But soon, none of that would matter.

———

Margot came to visit in the daytime, this time. She hovered in Will's doorway, the dogs eager to reacquaint themselves.

"I'm pregnant," she said, when Will reached for the whiskey.

They sat together, Margot with her legs crossed at the knee, her arms crossed over her stomach. Will, with his hands clasped in his lap.

"How far along?"

"Not very. A few weeks at most." Margot's eyes met his, everything he needed to know in that glance. Will asked anyway.

"Is that why you propositioned me?"

"You were the smart choice," Margot said. "Intelligent. Hard working. Beautiful enough, for a man. And you already had a child."

"You were evaluating my skills for shared custody?"

Margot shrugged. "In my limited experience, fathers like to have a say in what happens to their offspring. You seemed like you'd be willing to take what I offered you. Provide what was needed without overstepping."

"And what does overstepping mean to you, Margot?"

"This," she said with a smile, but it was teasing. "It isn't yours, in case you were wondering. I'm not that good a thief."

Will allowed himself the barest hint of a smile. "Whose is it?"

"Nobody of any importance. Just a man. Someone pretty enough, who offered me a drink and didn't press me for my name."

"Someone who won't come seeking something you don't want them to have a claim to."

Margot smiled, sharp and bitter. Will wondered when the last time she smiled with joy had been. If she ever did at all.

There was a fragility to Margot, but that of glass. If she broke, she would cut everyone around her, one last burst of vengeful spite.

There was beauty in that, too.

“So why come to tell me, then?” Will asked.

Margot tilted her head to the side, her long hair cascading over her shoulder. She looked sharper, for a moment, like the wrong response would be met with fangs. “I like to think we’re friends, of a sort.”

“Of a sort,” Will agreed. There was no other word that might suit. “Would you like something to drink?”

———

“Have you ever considered another child?” Will asked. He was sprawled out on his side of the bed, his face tucked into the pillow. One eye peaked out at Hannibal, slightly narrowed, calculating.

Margot and Mason Verger had been in Hannibal’s office this week, each musing on the nature of family. Hannibal didn’t believe in coincidences.

“You didn’t tell me you were still in contact with Margot Verger.”

Will’s expression darkened further. “I’m allowed to have friends.”

“Of course,” Hannibal agreed. He shut his book; he wouldn’t have further time for it tonight. “Though I would caution you to tread carefully around the Vergers.”

“I’ve read about the brother,” Will said. “And heard bits and pieces.”

“He was in my office this week,” Hannibal told him. “He stabbed my chair.”

Will let out a surprised bark of laughter. “Wish I’d seen the look on your face.”

“I was the picture of professionalism.”

“No,” Will said, “You have a look. Maybe other people don’t notice it, but I do.”

Hannibal paused. Will shifted so that Hannibal could see the expanse of his slow, easy smile.

“I see you, Hannibal,” he said. “Did you think I didn’t.”

“Of course not.” Not at this point, in their lives. Not after the things they’d been through.

But it was still a bit surprising, to hear it said out loud.

“You didn’t answer my question,” Will pointed out gently. Hannibal set his book aside, arranging himself in the bed so that he and Will faced each other properly.

“I never wanted children at all,” he reminded Will. “We’ve discussed that.”

“Before Michelle,” Will agreed, “I remember. But things are different now. You have Michelle. You have…” He swallowed. “You have me.”

“Do I?”

Will reached for him, his hand firm where it gripped Hannibal’s. “Don’t do that to me,” he said lowly. “You know what I’ve done for you. You know what I’ve risked.”

“I do,” Hannibal allowed.”

“I was never going to have kids,” Will said. “That’s not the same as not wanting them. I just… didn’t have space to fit them.”

Too much anger, too much darkness. Nightmares and whiskey. Hannibal could see it all writ across Will’s face. “And now?” he echoed.

Will glanced away. It was answer enough, but the words spilled from him anyway. “I feel as though I’ve already lost a child. There’s an emptiness lingering in my life.”

Hannibal tugged him closer. He ran his lips along Will’s jaw, feeling the soft shudder as Will’s body relaxed. “If I could undo it,” he whispered, “I would.”

He was *going* to undo it. Eventually. When the time was right. But that eventuality could not stop the pain Will felt *now*, the ache that settled in him at this very moment.

“What sort of parent would I have been to her, if I could replace her so easily?”

“Not a replacement,” Hannibal corrected. “Nothing could ever replace Abigail. Or Michelle, for that matter.”

Will’s hand found Hannibal’s side, clutching tight to his hip, grip bruising. “No,” he said firmly.

“A new opportunity,” Hannibal told him. “A fresh start.”

Will tilted his head, exposing his throat for more of Hannibal’s ministrations. “Do we deserve a fresh start?”

“There are far less deserving than we who’ve rebuilt themselves.”

Will sighed, eyes fluttering closed as Hannibal grazed his teeth over his pulse-point. “We can’t do it the old-fashioned way,” he reminded Hannibal when his hands began to wander.

“We have other options.”

When Hannibal looked up, Will was looking down at him, uncertain, hesitant.

“Do you want it?” Will asked.

Hannibal found he did. More than he had ever wanted anything, he wanted to create his family with Will.

“Perhaps a discussion for another day,” Hannibal suggested, lips trailing down to Will’s collarbone. “Once things are settled.”

“That’s not a no.”

Hannibal smiled. “It isn’t.”

———

“What are you doing?” Alana asked. She settled herself into the chair next to Will’s, her eyes on the toes of her sensible shoes.

“What I have to,” Will told her.

“By getting into bed with Freddie Lounds?” Alana glanced up, meeting his eyes. “That’s not like you, Will. None of this is like you.”

It wasn’t, and it was. None of it was like the Will he’d presented to the world. The only Will Alana had ever known.

The Will he would have liked to be, maybe. In another lifetime. Another world.

“You warned me about Hannibal,” Alana said. Her hands clasped in her lap, polish chipped at the edges. She picked at the chip, irritating it until a strip of flesh crossed through deep maroon.

He had. She hadn’t listened. No one had listened to a word Will said, until long after he wished they would stop.

“Hannibal is what he is,” Will said. “I am what I am. What are you, Alana?”

“Confused,” She said. “Alarmed. Afraid,” she added, almost as an afterthought.

“It’s normal to feel fear in the face of uncertainty.”

“I’m not afraid for myself.”

She turned, her eyes on Will, piercing, knowing. She had an air about her, almost motherly, that pinned guilt to Will’s chest.

Beyond her big mistake, a mistake Hannibal had actively cultivated for his own purposes, his manipulations unseen to anyone but Will, Alana was a good woman. Will had admired her, once. He admired her still, even with anger simmering in him.

This was another thing that Hannibal had ruined, another piece of Will's old life taken away against his will. Between Hannibal and the FBI, there was very little left of the man who'd once been Will Graham. The man who took his place was a stranger.

Will wasn't sure what would be left when he rose from the ashes. He was afraid to find out.

Too late now. He was hand-in-hand with Hannibal, careening down a road whose end lay shrouded in fog. Freedom? Or a brick wall to splatter themselves against?

"I'm afraid for *you*, Will," Alana said, when Will's silence stretched on too long. "You can't keep one foot in each room like this. Sooner or later, Hannibal will sense a double motive."

"I go where Jack tells me."

"Jack doesn't have your best interests at heart."

"Do you?"

Once, shame might have bloomed across Alana's face, but now she bristled, angry. They had ruined that innocence in her. Add it to the list.

"I won't ask you to forgive me," she said stiffly. "I have no right, I know that. But I'm involved in this, now, too. I can't not care about you, regardless of how you feel about me."

Will hadn't *wanted* her involved, though to be fair, he hadn't bothered to say that. Jack wasn't likely to listen to him, anyway. But there was the entire problem: Alana Bloom never should have gotten involved in any capacity with Hannibal Lecter, or the Chesapeake Ripper. She should have been left alone to teach, bright and cheery and kind.

There was a hardness to her, now, and while she'd made her own decisions, it was hard not to blame Hannibal for some of it.

Hard not to blame *himself*, for not wanting to put a stop to Hannibal when his actions led to the slow destruction of anyone who got too close.

"You don't have to worry about me," Will lied. "I know what I'm doing."

———

Hannibal drove Will to the hospital. He'd been unusually shaky after the phone call, hands twisting together in rough shifts.

"I didn't realize you and Margot had become such good friends."

"Neither had I," Will had muttered, eyes narrowed and unreadable.

They went while Michelle was in school. The less stress put upon Margot, the better.

She looked unfathomably tiny in her hospital bed, blinking up at them, hazy from painkillers.

“Hello, Dr. Lecter,” she whispered. “Is this a professional curiosity, or a personal one?”

“I’m merely here to deliver Will to your side,” he assured her. “Therapy can wait until you’re better.”

“Personal, then,” she said.

“On the contrary.” Hannibal settled a vase of flowers on the windowsill, turned so that the cheery blossoms opened towards Margot. “I bring the gift of privacy.”

Will would tell him everything anyway, and he did, spitting mad by the time he reached Hannibal in the waiting room.

“He gutted her,” he said, storming past Hannibal towards the door. “Like a fucking *fish*. Didn’t even have the decency to do it laparoscopically.”

Hannibal followed after, catching Will by the car with a hand on his shoulder. “You’ll find that difficult to prove.”

“I don’t have to prove it,” Will snarled. “He said it to her face.

“Will. It would be unwise to challenge Mason Verger.”

Will sucked in a breath through his nose, held it. He seemed reluctant to let it out at all, and when he did so, it was with a long, resigned sigh.

“Yeah, that’s what Margot said.”

They settled into the car. Will twisted his hands in his lap, his eyes gazing off vaguely into the distance.

Hannibal felt a sudden, deep, unfamiliar jealousy.

Margot had come to Will, first, in her efforts. She’d intended for the baby she lost to be Will’s. Perhaps not with the intention of tying Will to her irreversibly, but that would have been the end result. She felt a kinship with Will. He had been, as far as Hannibal could tell, the only person she’d called when she woke up in the hospital.

Will had always born attachments to other people, and Hannibal had tolerated them, but had Margot succeeded in her bid for Will’s attention, he was not sure what he would have done. Perhaps spoken differently to Mason when he’d come seeking information about Margot. He’d come to his conclusions all on his own, but if Margot’s pregnancy had come from Will, Hannibal had no doubt he’d have prodded Mason along, encouraging actions he committed regardless.

Will’s attachments to others were shallower, since his incarceration, but his commitment to Margot flared bright. They shared something that Hannibal didn’t understand, that he had not been invited to know.

It burned inside him.

But then again, Margot *hadn't* been successful. And Will was here, with Hannibal, heading home to their child. Will had committed himself to Hannibal, had betrayed Jack to keep Hannibal. Will had *chosen* them.

Hannibal reached for Will's hand. He jumped, startled, but then slowly turned his wrist, until they were palm to palm, and he could lace their fingers together.

"I'm not going to do anything stupid," Will said softly.

One hand still on the wheel, Hannibal brought Will's knuckles to his lips. "I trust you."

———

Michelle was out in the yard with the dogs. Will could hear her joyous laughter as she tumbled about, the happy barks that accompanied her.

He'd left the front door open, so that he could see her easily if he poked his head into the living room. Michelle loved cooking with her Tėtis, but while at Will's house, the job fell entirely to Daddy. The dogs were too great a distraction for any child.

Will's meals were always simpler, anyway. Fish, some potatoes. A can of corn. Michelle never complained, not that he would have known how to improve if she had. She'd only refused a meal with Will once, and it had been entirely based on the texture of the vegetables, not a comment on Will's cooking.

Maybe they'd go for ice cream later. It was a bit of a drive, but Michelle always got so excited over treats that Will could never seem to help himself. They'd probably have to work on that, in Italy.

In *Italy*.

Will's hand paused on the knife. Italy, their little family, the dogs. Far from the FBI, from the Chesapeake Ripper. Maybe Hannibal would take up his hobby again. Maybe he wouldn't, maybe he'd spend a few years just enjoying their lives.

But if he did… If he did…

He wouldn't risk them. Will knew that, he *had* to know that. Hannibal wouldn't risk the peace they were going to build.

Maybe he could give up the theatricality, if not the craft itself. Kill, consume. Don't leave bodies behind for the police to find.

The knife slipped. Will cursed and stuck his bleeding thumb in his mouth. Just a nick. His knives were all horribly dull, but maybe that was a good thing. If he'd been in *Hannibal's* kitchen, he might have sliced his whole damn hand off.

As he wrapped his thumb in a band-aid, Will heard the dogs begin to bark, wild and loud, accompanied by Michelle's upset hushing. They normally listened to her better than this.

Coming out into the living room, Will heard a voice, high and sickly sweet.

“Would you like a chocolate?”

There was a large black SUV in Will’s driveway. The dogs had gathered around Michelle, except for Buster, who scurried back and forth in a frantic semi-circle. A man with wild, untamed blond hair was bent at the waist, holding out an unwrapped sweet towards Michelle’s grasping fingers.

“Michelle,” Will snapped. She jerked back, a guilty expression on her face.

The man rose to his full height, turning a wide, beaming smile on Will. His eyes were familiar, but it was the mannerisms that tipped Will off, the high-energy, manic thrum to his body, the tap of his foot.

“Mason.”

“You must be the baby daddy,” Mason said, arms spread wide as if he meant to pull Will into a hug. His grin spread from ear-to-ear, showing off his teeth. “So sorry for your loss.”

Will didn’t approach, instead whistling for the dogs. They trotted obediently towards the house, but Michelle remained, looking back and forth between the two of them with wide-eyed uncertainty.

“Michelle,” Will said firmly, “Go inside.”

“Oh, I don’t mind,” Mason said, taking a step closer. “I love tykes. *Love ‘em.* Children are the future, right? Gotta bring the sprouts up right, water them, tend to them, pluck their weeds…” He reached forward, his hand hovering over Michelle’s hair, as if to pat her head.

In two quick steps, Will was between them, shoving Michelle backwards and out of reach. She stumbled, her small hands gripping Will’s arm to steady herself.

“Inside,” Will snapped, pushing her towards the porch. She listened this time, but not without giving Will a confused, hurt look that tugged at his chest.

“Protective,” Mason said as Michelle hurried into the house. “Gotta love it. You’d have made an excellent Daddy to our Verger heir.”

“What do you want, Mason?”

“To extend my condolences, of course,” Mason said, throwing his arms out wide again. “To offer my sympathy, my most heartfelt sorrows. We all lost something this week. Well, Margot lost the most.”

He grinned, all teeth. Will’s hands clenched into fists at his side. “How did you get my address?”

“I like to keep an eye on my Margot,” Mason said. “I can’t follow her every single second, of course, but I can certainly try. And how will I keep her safe, if I don’t know the kind of boys

she's seeing? Well, *boy*," Mason corrected. "Usually she prefers her meat a little *softer*, juicier, curvier. With tits."

"My relationship with Margot is none of your business," Will said. "My *life* is none of your business."

"What sort of games you play with my little sister is *entirely* my business," Mason drawled. "Tell me, is she a screamer? Or did she just lie back and think of England while you did her dirty work for her?"

Will punched him, his fist catching Mason's cheek, turning his head. Mason stumbled backwards, one hand clutching his already-bruising face.

He began to laugh.

"Oh, I *like* you, Mr. Graham," He said, grin split wide. "You're a wild card. I love a wild card, *love* a good surprise."

"Stay away from me," Will growled. "Stay away from my daughter. Stay away from Margot."

"Well, it's a big house, but it's not *that* big," Mason drawled. "Only two kitchens. Real easy to bump into someone."

Will took a step forward, and Mason laughed again, backing towards his car.

"I like you," he repeated. "So, I'll give you a little warning, Mr. Graham: You've already bitten off more than you can chew. Try not to choke on it."

Will's hands were shaking, rage bubbling up in him. He wanted to tear Mason to pieces. He wanted to rip him limb from limb and leave the pieces for Margot to find, a gift. He wanted to serve his heart to Hannibal on a fucking platter.

He was still shaking when Mason left, when Michelle poked her head out to call to him, cautious and uncertain.

Chapter End Notes

So. This has been a long time coming, and there are a couple of reasons for that.

First, and most importantly: Life's just been really busy. Pandemic. Work. Mental Health. Real life things. All of that would have delayed the chapter by weeks, if not months, regardless.

But also, because I've been feeling really uncharitable towards this fic, for a few very important reasons.

Look, I love you guys. I love that you are emotionally invested in this story, I love that it makes you feel things, I love that you are excited when I update, I love that you tell me your thoughts.

I don't love when you tell me the things you don't like about the story.

Every chapter, there have been people in the comments telling me how disappointed they are, how much they don't like the choices Will is making, how they don't like how Hannibal's getting off easy, how they wish the story was going a different way.

First, this story is called All The Wrong Choices. Sometimes, people are going to make wrong choices.

Second, the entire series, start to finish, has been planned out since the very first chapter of Family of Choice. Nothing is going to change because you make suggestions. I already know what's going to happen.

And third, and most important: It's rude. This isn't Goodreads or Amazon, where you leave reviews to let others know if they'll like a book. It's unlikely any other readers will ever see your comments. Your comments are a direct dialogue with me, specifically. It is really rude and hurtful to leave me comments detailing how disappointed you are about all the things you don't like.

Beyond that... Guys, I love that you're excited, I love that you want more. "I can't wait for more" is a good comment. "When will you update?" "Is this abandoned?" "It's been a really really long time!" and other varieties are just upsetting. Firstly, because last time I updated my fics I was asked THE DAY AFTER POSTING when the next chapter would be, and then within only TWO WEEKS if the stories were abandoned. And second because if it HAS been a while... trust me, I'm aware. You reminding me just makes me feel guilty and upset and makes it harder to write.

(also a third part that I could honestly deal with and it's not that important but on top of the other two things is frustrating: i get that y'all are (justifiably!) upset with Alana for her actions but I really like Alana and have been trying to write her as a sympathetic character so if we could dial back the Alana bashing even a TINY bit I'd appreciate it. Again, not that important, but on top of EVERYTHING else...)

When I last updated, the majority of the comments were variations of 'FINALLY' and 'I am unhappy with this.' One comment was SOLELY about how it had 'FINALLY' updated. I write for myself, yes, but it's still very discouraging when hours of work gets nothing but negativity in response. I honestly almost didn't write this chapter. I almost slapped a discontinued label on the fic (yes i'll tell you if it's discontinued, if I haven't said so, it isn't) and abandoned it completely.

It's okay if you don't like the fic. It's okay if you don't want to read it anymore or don't want to wait for more chapters. All of that is fine! What's not fine is telling *me* how

much you don't like it. Because there's more to come in the Bad Choices department and if every chapter is met with 'Here's all the things I don't like,' I am not going to finish this series. And I really want to finish this series.

I would rather have no comments at all than have nothing but people telling me how unhappy they are. Please be more careful when you leave comments on people's work.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

> Warnings for Mason Verger, including canon-typical violence and threats, and implications of CSA (nothing happens in text, nothing is graphically described, and no harm comes to any children during the course of this chapter).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The pig sat on the porch when they returned from the store, spread out onto a soft, slippery bit of fabric. It had been monogrammed, like Tètis's towels. Michelle made out an M and a V among all the curly, swirling lines.

The pig itself was bound in a bright red ribbon, with an apple set into its mouth. You were only supposed to do the apple bit if you were cooking it, but when Michelle gave the head a poke it felt chilly and squishy. Not like cooked meat.

Immediately, Daddy pulled her back from it, his hand heavy on her shoulder. She glared up at him, unhappy with the roughness. Lately, she seemed to be dragged and yanked and picked up and hauled around all the time, and she didn't like it. She was a big girl; she could move herself.

"Don't touch it," Daddy rumbled, his eyes dark, narrowed as he stared at the pig.

"It's *dead*," Michelle said.

"I know it's dead. Probably bled and gutted, too. Don't touch it."

This, to Michelle, seemed the height of unfairness. There was something dead just in front of her, something safe that people outside their family wouldn't find inappropriate, and Daddy would not allow her to investigate it. How was she supposed to learn *anything* if she was never allowed to touch things?

"What are we gonna do with it?"

Daddy frowned down at the pig. He nudged the fabric with his foot, bunching it up around the monogram.

"Tètis knows a good suckling pig recipe," Michelle suggested. "We could have a dinner party."

"We aren't going to eat this," Daddy said, firm, immediate.

"That's a waste," Michelle said, appalled. "That's *wasting*."

Daddy gave the pig an indecipherable look, the corners of his mouth turned down, brow furrowed, eyes narrowed. Michelle's first thought was 'angry', but who would be angry at a free pig?

"Get in the car," Daddy said, turning to shuffle the curious dogs into the house. Michelle frowned at his back.

"You said we were gonna make lunch."

"We'll get McDonald's on the way."

Any further complaints Michelle had vanished. She bolted for the car, dancing impatiently by the back door. McDonald's was a very special Daddy-only treat, and Michelle was *not* going to miss out.

"Where are we going?" She asked, as Daddy wrapped the pig up and tossed it into the trunk.

"We're gonna pick up Tėtis from work."

Michelle hesitated, long enough that Daddy opened the door for her and hoisted her into the back seat. "Tėtis is gonna be mad." Even if they drove with all the windows down, he'd smell the French fry grease.

"He *better* be," Daddy muttered.

Grown-ups were weird.

———

Will shooed Michelle upstairs to change out of crumb-dusted clothing. Hannibal had taken one look at Will's expression and rearranged his schedule. Thankfully, the afternoon had been set aside for personal work with his files; in the past few weeks, he'd been decreasing the number of patients he saw.

Preparing for the move. Will had been hesitant to ask about it, and in return, Hannibal hadn't offered any information. What city they were going to, if there was a house already waiting, what *day* they were leaving, Will had left all of that to Hannibal. He couldn't ask. He wasn't ready to know.

Will heaved the blanket-wrapped pig onto the kitchen island. It was heavier than it had looked, and his arms ached from the task. Hannibal peeled the blanket back, face impassive.

"He left us a gift," Will growled."

"He left us more than one."

Hannibal turned towards the pantry, usually kept locked. Ostensibly to keep little hands away from Hannibal's butcher table, more likely because the meat in that fridge was longer pig than the one on the island. From inside, he drew a cardboard box, handing it to Will. "This arrived this morning."

The note affixed to the front labeled the box with Michelle's name in elaborate gold calligraphy. Her *full* name, First-Middle-Last. 'Happy Belated Birthday' right below it. Will lifted the lid off the box to find an intricate porcelain doll, cupid's bow lips hand-painted, clothes carefully stitched. This was the sort of doll that cost a fortune, the kind which little girls were never meant to actually play with.

Will set the box aside and inspected the doll, feeling the hefty buckwheat-weight of it in his hands, touching the blonde curls. Then he smashed it off the marble countertop.

Shards of porcelain scattered everywhere, all through the kitchen. Hannibal watched him with a placid look on his face, one that Will knew well, by now.

Whatever Hannibal was feeling about the situation, it was inappropriate to show on his carefully crafted human mask. Good. Will wanted him to be angry, to be violently, *murderously* enraged.

Mason Verger's *proclivities* may not have been obvious to the world at large, but Will could read them on his face the first time he met him. There was a look in his eyes when he had spoken to Michelle, a thirst for power and control that made Will nauseous to think about.

In one glance, Will had read Mason's history, the things that went unsaid outside of suspicious whispers. In one glance, Will had known him, and been *sickened*.

"He's toying with us," he told Hannibal.

"He is," Hannibal agreed, pulling a broom and dustpan from the closet. Will wanted to beat him around the head with the dustpan; a calm composure in the face of trouble was all well and good, but this was their *child*.

"He knows our daughter's full name," Will said. "Her address."

"I imagine there is little Mason Verger doesn't know, if he wants to know it."

Will needed something else to destroy. His fingers were twitching, aching for something fragile to twist and rend between them. He felt like he had when he… like he had the night Randall Tier had come to his house. That same heart-pounding fear and anger twined together in an uncomfortably potent desire.

He'd wanted to protect his daughter at all costs. He had been willing to do anything to ensure her safety. He felt willing again, looking down at the shards of porcelain disappearing into the trash. For a moment, a heartbeat, he felt certain he could and would murder Mason Verger with his bare hands, given the sense.

And then that moment passed, and Will's willingness evaporated. The rage stayed, though, the desire to see Mason rent asunder. He looked up at Hannibal, who looked back with a furrowed brow and curious eyes.

"The study," Hannibal decided. "You light the fire and get Michelle settled in. I'll bring the wine."

———

“I’ve never wanted to kill someone before,” Will said, once they were both warmed by the flames and half into their cups.

"Haven't you?" Hannibal asked. "I've seen your lessons. 'Everyone has thought about killing someone,' was, I believe, a core theme."

"Abstract thoughts," Will said. "Daydreams. Dalliances with deviancy. Nothing concrete, nothing... *real*. When everyday people think about murder, they never truly want to *commit* it. I've never felt an urge that was more than a passing fantasy."

“Our mutual friend would beg to differ,” Hannibal pointed out. He’d been proud of such a step, in awe of the beauty Will made from Tier, but he had also been prepared for this backslide. Hannibal was a master of baby steps, of easing his way in until his conversation partner was ready.

Will grimaced, hiding his distress in another sip of wine. He couldn’t hide from Hannibal, though. Hannibal knew his expressions, knew the way his shoulders sloped, and his hands fidgeted with the buttons of his shirt cuffs whenever discomfort overwhelmed him.

"That was self-defense," Will said softly, as if he did not quite believe it himself.

"And that you continued to assault him after he was subdued?"

Will's eyes narrowed, darkened. He didn't like to be pushed. He was more prone to fleeing than to facing his fears, more prone to deflection than introspection. At least where Hannibal's interests were concerned.

"Impulsive," he said. "Heat of the moment. I wasn't entirely in control of myself at the time."

It was a lie. Hannibal knew it to be a lie, and what was more, Will knew he knew. Their eyes met over their glasses, and there was a challenge in Will's eyes. *I dare you to press me on this. I dare you to push too far, to try and tell me anything other than the lie I need to believe.*

It was a promise that Hannibal's efforts would go unappreciated, would topple the fragile balance of their mutual peace.

Hannibal wanted to push anyway. The words were on the tip of his tongue- *'And the post-mortem mutilation, then?*' He swallowed them. There were other pathways he could take.

"Your feelings towards Mason Verger are not impulsive."

"Are yours?" Will asked. Hannibal had all of his attention, now, his curiosity peaked.

"I have never been prone to fits of impulsiveness," Hannibal said. "I prefer, always, to walk into a situation with my head clear."

This earned him a rude snort from Will, who made no attempt to hide it. Hannibal frowned at him, disapproving both of the poor manners and the implication.

"You are a creature of impulse," Will drawled. "You allow yourself to be driven entirely by your Id."

"I would disagree with that assumption. I'm quite known for level-headedness and careful planning. I would think it shows in all my work."

Will knew his work well, of course, and yet it brought no clarity to his features. "Impulse," he insisted, "tempered only by practicality."

"It would seem to me that a devotion to practicality by necessity negates the idea that I am primarily driven by Id."

"No," Will said. "No, all of your decisions, even the ones you spend hours on, all of them come down to pure, primitive instincts at their core. You may take your time to plan out your endgame, but it's touch-move and once you have your hand on a piece, you can't let it go."

Hannibal twisted and turned that logic in his head, and could find no fault with it, much as it irritated him.

"Be that as it may," he finally said, giving Will a nod that seemed to brighten him considerably, though his face had not lost that sallow, worried scrunch, "my instincts do not rule me when it comes to Mason Verger. Nor do yours, as you've said. So, what does rule you?"

Will considered that for a long moment, long enough that Hannibal grew concerned there would be no answer. Then he set his empty glass aside with a sigh. "Love," he said. "Storge, philia, eros. Mason has threatened that which is mine. He has encroached on areas he should never have been allowed to glimpse."

"Your affection for Margot is stronger than you'd alluded to," Hannibal noted. It showed his hand just a bit too much. Will latched on with sharp fangs.

"Jealous, Hannibal?"

"Far from it," Hannibal said smoothly, as if he might seal the lid on this Pandora's box now that it had been opened. It did him no good; he could lie to Will about a great many things, but Will always seemed able to see straight through Hannibal's feelings in regard to him. "You deserve strong and sturdy friendships. It would be selfish of me to imagine I might keep your attention all for myself."

"And of course, you're never selfish," Will said, one eyebrow raised. He didn't press the issue, probably sensing that Hannibal would not take kindly to the insult. instead, he turned his gaze back to the fire once more.

"Something has to be done," he told Hannibal. "Instinct or design. Children who don't get the attention they seek will only escalate."

"Will you be the disciplinarian, then?"

Will hummed, soft in the shadows of the room. "You've more practice than I do," he said. "I might get it wrong. "

"Some learn best by doing."

Will ducked his head. Hannibal could see a hint of a smile tugging at his lips, worried, diminutive, but still there.

"You were wrong, you know," Hannibal told him.

"Hmm?"

"When you said you'd never wanted to kill anyone before. There was a time when you wanted to kill me."

"No there wasn't," Will said, automatic, his shoulders raised defensively. "We've been over this, before."

"Not with dear Matthew Brown," Hannibal said. "But on your own. Under your own power."

Will looked down at his hands. "No," he said slowly. "No, you and I are too thoroughly entwined, now. I would not survive such a separation."

Hannibal tilted his head, observing Will carefully. It had all the hallmarks of honesty, but Will's eyes were averted, completely rather than slightly. He stared at his empty wine glass as though it held the secrets of the universe.

"If you *were* going to," Hannibal asked, his curiosity piqued, "how would you do it."

Will drew in a sharp breath. As if it pained him to dwell on the thought, one which was no doubt already there, buried in the back of his mind. "With my hands," he said softly, and with utter certainty. "With my bare hands around your throat."

Hannibal felt a shiver roll through him. Perhaps they would put Michelle to bed early, tonight. "Hands are intimate. Far more intimate than a gun."

"Mason Verger doesn't deserve intimacy."

Hannibal closed his eyes, considering. They were balanced on a precipice, precarious and uncertain. "Whatever the decision, I leave it up to you," he said. "But I would caution you, Will, to know exactly what you are getting into before you cross Mason Verger."

Will looked askance, the light of the fire glinting in his eyes. "Don't worry," he said. "I won't give in to instinct."

———

Will dreams of Mason, every time he closes his eyes. He can smell the straw of the barn, hear the snuffling of the pigs. Mason's skin is warm under his hands.

Mason does not deserve intimacy, but Will won't believe he's really dead unless he feels it for himself. He needs to see the light leave Mason's eyes up close.

Every dream is different. They blur together. Some nights, Mason is still choking from Will's hands when Will draws the knife across his throat. Some nights Will takes him apart piece by piece.

Every night, Will feeds him to the pigs, tossing him in to hear their squeals, listening to them fight for scraps.

He wakes, sweat damp, hungry.

———

Hannibal had known Mason was coming since that morning, but it still caught him off guard when Mason let himself into the office. For one thing, Hannibal was used to far better manners from his clients. For another, he was not used to having his clients come barreling in, shoving past him, their hands brushing against his coat.

"Well, well, well, good doctor. How lovely to see you."

"Mason," Hannibal acknowledged, pointing towards a chair. "Have a seat."

Mason ignored him, as Mason so often ignored those around him. Hannibal had heard a great deal from Margot, slightly less from social gossip, and Mason lived up to every last word.

He prowled the room, or attempted to. There were lions and there were men, and Mason was neither. Mason was a misshapen thing, a foul and stunted creature. Perhaps it was nature, perhaps it was nurture, but the time to blame his Freudian excuse was long past. Mason was an adult now, responsible for his own choices, and he had chosen to live in pure joy at what suffering he could inflict.

But whatever monster Mason was, it was not intimidating. Not here. What made Mason dangerous was his money, his influence. It was not his form, or his mannerisms, that slick smile he gave Hannibal from the other side of his desk.

Hannibal had money, too, and four plane tickets to Italy that could be moved up if necessary, though he would have preferred to keep his current schedule. There were things to wrap up, things to do. He did not have the time or patience to devote to fighting Mason Verger.

"I was surprised to see your name in my appointment book today."

"No, you weren't," Mason said, simple and direct. "Or if you were, you shouldn't have been. Will Graham would have told you I was coming. I must *say*, doctor, you've done well for yourself. He's young enough to be your *son*, I was *scandalized*."

They were nine years apart, but Hannibal ignored the dig at his age. "I don't make a habit of discussing my personal life with my patients."

"Oh, we're more than patient and doctor, *aren't* we?" Mason drawled. He reached for the stack of papers on Hannibal's desk, shifting them aside, fondling the scalpel Hannibal kept to sharpen his charcoal pencils. "Why, I'd say we're practically *family*. After all, you felt the need to insert yourself into mine."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, skip the Hippocratic nonsense," Mason said, waving it away with a flourish of his hand. "I know Margot is a patient here. You know that I know. Don't pretend on my behalf."

Hannibal circled the desk, coming to stand by the chairs himself. Leading by example, as though Mason was a very young child. He certainly seemed like one.

"If you've come to ask about Margot's therapy, I'm afraid I cannot answer any of your questions. Our time today would be much better suited talking about *you*."

Hannibal could see the effect those words had on Mason, the visible brightening of his features. If there was anything in the world Mason loved, it was talking about himself. His lips spread into a broad grin that showed off all of his teeth.

But just as quickly, Mason pivoted, stalking across the room towards the chaise, throwing himself upon it, a Roman emperor spreading himself out to be hand-fed by his servants. "Me," he said. "Me me me *me*. I'm so *tired* of talking about me, really I am."

This was, of course, a lie, and Mason made no attempts to pretend it wasn't. He grinned at Hannibal, as if they were both in on a delightful secret.

"It's so *selfish* to focus on oneself all the time, wouldn't you agree? Of *course* you would, you're a psychiatrist! You know all about *'acceptable'* behaviors." With a sigh, Mason stretched out further, arms above his head, the picture of relaxation. "*I* want to talk about *poor* Margot."

He was not to be budged. Hannibal settled into his chair, legs crossed, prepared for a long, exhausting session. "Very well, then. Tell me about Margot."

Mason beamed. "You know, she used to *follow* me around like a lost. Little. *Puppy*," he said. "It's a twin thing, really it is, we were *inseparable*, and not just because Margot's other friends had a habit of *abandoning* her."

With prompting from Mason, no doubt. Hannibal took down a note, for appearances sake. "You and your sister were very close, as children?"

Margot, Hannibal knew, would tell a different story. And she had, sometimes in tears, staring down at her lap, rending her tissue to shreds. Hannibal knew very well what Mason had put her through, as children, and Mason smiled knowingly at him.

"*Thick* as *thieves,*" Mason drawled, eyes bright with unbridled amusement. "We went *everywhere* together. Joined at the *hips*, we were. And then we got older, and suddenly it

seemed my dearest sister had less time for me. She went away to college, though she'd *promised* we'd attend the same one."

"How did you feel, when Margot changed those plans?"

"How did that make me *feel*," Mason mimicked, his tone high and unpleasant. "How would it make *you* feel? She started hanging out with all sorts of *unsavory* types. I simply *had* to tell Papa, it was for her own good, really."

That, Hannibal recalled, had resulted in Margot being pulled from her first-choice school and sent to the less prestigious university Mason attended. It had also led to the threat of conversion therapy.

Despite himself, Hannibal's grip tightened on his pen. He was spending far too much time with Will; it had made him much too sympathetic. He soothed himself with visions of Mason's head on a silver platter.

"You were lonely," Hannibal surmised, and it was, perhaps, the truest thing that had been said so far. Mason did not so much as flinch, but there was a flicker in his eyes.

"People would have *paid* to be my friend," He said. His voice was deeper, lacking the high lilt he affected as part of his image. This was venom, thick and vicious.

And then whatever humanity had been there, vanished, locked away behind artifice and a mockery of glee. "Margot's never had many friends, poor *dear*," Mason said, pushing himself back up into a seated position. "But suddenly she's off, coming home *late* and *tired*. She made friends with your boyfriend, how very unlike her. So *sorry* to hear about the affair, by the way, but I took care of the consequences for you."

Mason still believed Will had sired Margot's pregnancy, which meant that Margot had not disavowed him of the notion. Perhaps she had been avoiding him, perhaps she was attempting to hide behind Will. Perhaps she simply didn't want Mason following her to bars, though without her uterus they'd served their purpose.

Curious, whatever the reason.

"Tell me, then," Hannibal said, tapping his pen against the page. "About *poor* Margot."

"Mmm, you first, *doctor.* Tell me, did your little girl like her new dolly?"

Hannibal's blood ran hot, and for a moment, he could see nothing at all. Will would have wanted him to bring it up, which was why Hannibal hadn't told him when Mason scheduled an appointment. He'd hoped to avoid the subject entirely and keep Mason's attention and energy *off* his family.

Instead, Mason had trod right over that boundary with a giddy grin.

Killing Mason would be easy, exceedingly so. He was not used to being challenged, and he had no idea of the things Hannibal got up to in his spare time. There was a scalpel within reach, and the doors out were on the opposite wall, with Hannibal between Mason. He could

make it quick. He could be on Mason before he even had time to realize his mistake, slicing the jugular, leaving him to bleed out on the floor.

Or he could take his time. Make it slow. The office's soundproofing was imperfect, but thorough, the better to preserve doctor/patient confidentiality. Unless someone was pressed right to the doors or the windows, they would be unlikely to hear the screaming.

Mason would cry and blubber like an infant, Hannibal knew his type. Haughty monsters who'd never before been told 'no.' It would be so easy to reduce him to something pathetic.

But others no doubt knew where Mason had gone, a whole team of security. And there would be no way to hide the body, let alone the blood.

Hannibal's grip loosened on his pen. He let out a slow breath through his nose, though he knew Mason was watching for such shows of emotion.

"It was inappropriate of you to send a gift to my home, Mason," he said, words firm, voice gentle. The way he would talk to a more sympathetic patient.

Mason affected a pout, lower lip jutted out almost comically. "I just *adore* children," he said. "Big ones, little ones. Kids who climb on rocks. The shy ones are my favorites. I like to crack open their shells."

Hannibal's pen let out an ominous creak.

"It's a breach of our professional relationship," he said, instead of throwing Mason through the window.

"Of course, of course," Mason said, waving a hand. "But we didn't *have* a relationship at the time, and *besides*, I think Margot's relationship with Will makes me more of a... *fun uncle*."

"Mason-"

Mason stood, stretching. "You have a lovely little girl, doctor," he said, with a smile that showed every last tooth. "Whatever game you and the sperm donor are playing, make sure you remember who's playing. There's all sorts of dangerous types out there, you wouldn't want her to get hurt."

———

Daddy was doing Interviews.

Michelle didn't really know what that meant. He didn't work for the newspaper, or for a fancy TV show they didn't watch. But he was going to be doing interviews *all day long*, which meant she and Tėtis got to spend the day at the cliff house.

"Italy?" Abigail asked, as she and Michelle helped Tėtis prepare lunch. Tėtis was toasting sandwiches while they made salad, Michelle being very, *very* careful as she cut up vegetables. "You've decided, then?"

"I considered France," Tėtis told her, "but Michelle speaks no French, and yours is horrid."

Michelle thought that was rude, but Abigail didn't seem upset. She just shrugged and began to peel an onion. "That's high school, for you. If you ever need someone to count to ten or tell you what color something is, I'm your girl."

Curiously, Michelle nudged a tomato her way. Abigail looked at it and laughed. "Rouge," she said. "That one's easy."

"Perhaps we should try the Italian," Tėtis suggested. "Abigail, yours is improving, but your accent needs work."

"Rosso," Abigail said, and then again, rolling the 'R', "*Rrrrosso.*"

"What about *my* accent?" Michelle asked.

"You're a kid, no one cares what your accent sounds like," Abigail told her. "They'll just be impressed you're speaking another language."

"Besides, you learned at a much younger age than poor Abigail," Tėtis said. "You've had more practice. Your accent is improving."

"Improving," Michelle said, offended.

"I'm afraid both of you are at a disadvantage," Tėtis said, flipping a sandwich over. "Given my own accent is irrevocably Lithuanian, and you've both learned from me. Minnesota and Baltimore both have distinct tells, as well. You'll both likely be a bit muddled until you spend time with native speakers."

"I don't want to be muddled," Michelle complained. "I want to be understood."

"You will be," Tėtis promised. "You just need to be patient. When we settle into our new home, you'll attend school with children and teachers who are all native speakers. You're young yet, fluency is not far off. In the meantime, we'll practice together."

"Quando?" Michelle demanded, setting her knife aside and crossing her arms over her chest. She'd hoped it would make her look serious, but Abigail seemed to be stifling giggles in her hand. Nobody ever took Michelle seriously.

Tėtis answered her in simple, slow Italian, waiting patiently for her to untangle the words in her head. *"We wait for Will,"* he told her. *"When Will is ready, we will go. We will rent a home, first. Then, we will pick a house together. Then, you will start school."*

"Rent?" Abigail asked. *"Not buy first? Before moving,"* She added, her words clumsy, but easier for Michelle to follow.

"Will will want to help pick," Tėtis said, *"But a hotel will not have room for seven dogs."*

"All the dogs are coming?" Michelle asked, forgetting her practice in her excitement. "*All* of them?"

Tėtis raised an eyebrow. When that meant nothing to Michelle, he added, *"Ripeti en italiano, per favore."*

"Seven dogs come too?" Michelle said impatiently, forgoing grammar in favor of getting her point across. *"Every dog. All. Winston, Buster, Zoe-"*

Tėtis nodded. *"Every single dog will come with us. They are family, too, aren't they?"*

Michelle grinned, bright and wide. Soon. Soon, her whole family would be together.

———

"Mason likes you," Margot said. She announced it the way some people announce a death in their immediate family. As if her words were about to bring Will's very world crashing down around him.

Will stirred his whiskey, staring out across the dark lawn. They were settled on the porch, the dogs sniffing about before them. Buster was in Margot's lap, as if he could sense her need for comfort and reassurance.

"Should I be concerned?"

"Very."

Will hummed. "He sent my daughter a doll."

Margot blanched, and set her own glass aside when her hands began to shake. "Mason can be... unkind to young children," she said slowly, every word a struggle. The heavy weight of her pain seemed to strangle her. "He loves children," she said meaningfully. "But he's never been any good with them. Or for them."

"I know," Will assured her, settling the uneasy tension of her shoulders. She didn't need to force herself to speak it aloud. The whispers around Mason Verger were easy to find, if one looked hard enough. Whatever Will hadn't known for sure, Hannibal had been able to confirm for him.

Besides that, Mason's threats were not as subtle as he thought they were.

"He had a black eye for days," Margot said quietly. "He praised your daring. From Mason, that's as good as a threat."

"Mason can threaten me all he likes," Will said. "It won't get him anywhere."

"He has more power than you do."

"He has more *money* than I do," Will corrected.

"Money is power."

"Money is money. Hannibal has money," Will pointed out, taking a sip of his drink. It burned on the way down, the heat steadying him. "It may not be as much as Mason, or maybe it is, I've never asked. But he has enough that I don't worry about Mason getting me fired from my job, or whatever it is he might do with all that 'power.'"

It wouldn't work, anyway. No amount of cash was going to convince Jack to let Will go. He was too damn good at his job; he'd given himself more job security than he had any want or need of.

"He can do a hell of a lot more than get you blacklisted," Margot warned. "There's such a thin line between livelihood and life."

"Mason doesn't scare me." It was only half a lie. Mason around Michelle scared him, terrified Will more than anything else ever had. But his life?

If anyone were going to kill him, it would be the Chesapeake Ripper. Hannibal was too possessive to ever let anyone else do it. If Hannibal ever grew bored of him, Will suspected every piece of his body would find its way into the pantry, so that Hannibal could consume and keep him, forever.

that was a thought that was a little too uncomfortable for Will to linger on, though. It brought up too many questions about Hannibal's love for him, about how sturdy it was, about his love for *Michelle*.

Hannibal had eaten Abigail, Will was certain of it. She had been expendable, in the long run, to protect Hannibal's life and freedom, but his attachment to her had been genuine. Will would have known if it wasn’t he knew now what faces Hannibal wore when he was faking his humanity.

"You don't give Mason enough credit," Margot said.

"You give him too much," Will countered. "Or rather, you give him the right amount for your personal safety. He has less hold on me than he does on you, less access."

Margot flinched. Guilt coated Will's tongue, sour and unpleasant.

"Margot, if you ever wanted to leave-"

"I would lose everything," Margot said stiffly. "Don't apologize."

"I didn't."

"You did, in your own way. But you're right. Mason has more hold on me than anyone else. We are thoroughly, irrevocably intertwined, by virtue of our shared birth. We began life by killing a woman together," she said with a bitter laugh, "it doesn't get more connected than that."

She went quiet, her face drawn, contemplating. Will poured her two more fingers of whiskey. She slept on his couch that night.

———

"Jack thinks you're manipulating me into killing Mason," Will announced, staring into the fire. Michelle was asleep, and they were meant to be making the journey to bed themselves, but Hannibal could never resist a nightcap.

He took a sip of his wine now, a Merlot that had been perfectly aged, a red so deep it was almost black. Like blood in the moonlight. "Am I?" he asked. Will eyed him shrewdly.

"Yes," he finally said. "Or at least, you're attempting to coax me into indulging feelings I already had. You can't create something from nothing."

"Clever I may be, but I assure you, I am no god."

Will looked pensive. He nursed his wine, taking sips so small as to be entirely wasted on him. "You've worn off on me," he said. "I'm as good a liar now as you are."

It was meant to stab at him. Hannibal had perfected his shield from the world, immune to most guilt and shame, but it hit home just a little. Will had that effect on him, creating humanity where Hannibal had once exercised it. Or perhaps becoming a father had made him more vulnerable. Either way, Hannibal thought of Abigail, of his promise of no more lies, and felt the faintest stirrings of pain.

He dismissed them.

"I told Jack you've confessed to nothing," Will continued. "That you've given me only vagaries."

"I've certainly tried. A small amount of plausible deniability can go a long way."

"I've already stretched Jack as far as I can take him. He didn't file charges against me for Randall Tier."

"Self-defense," Hannibal interjected. Will narrowed his eyes.

"What I did with the body after, what Jack *allowed* me to do, was that also self-defense?"

"No," Hannibal admitted, his voice more awe than he might have liked to confess to, "that was art."

"It would tip the scales a little more towards murder in the eyes of a jury. Certainly, Jack looks at me differently now. But he still allowed me to interview Doctor Du Maurier."

This, too, was meant to elicit a reaction from Hannibal, but Will was still learning in his attempts to manipulate Hannibal's feelings. It had only been a matter of time before Bedelia inserted herself into the situation. He had always allowed her to see too much, sensing kinship in her. Bedelia had always walked a fine line between dinner companion and dinner. She had merely tipped the scales a little further.

"Doctor/patient confidentiality only stretches so far," Hannibal said. "If she fears I am a danger to myself, or to others, she has every right to report me to the FBI. In fact, she has not only the right, but the moral and ethical *obligation*."

Will watched him as he spoke, eyes narrowed, taking him in. He shook his head, huffing out a sigh. "You're always so *calm*," he said. "I can see why no one would suspect you of hiding rage underneath the surface."

Hannibal considered voicing his displeasure. He and Will had discussed Hannibal's hobbies several times now. Will still believed him to be driven by emotion. Hannibal insisted he took pleasure in the reaping, and everything else was done with careful practicality. Will hadn't been swayed, and he wouldn't be by Hannibal protesting again. Hannibal let the comment slide, though he allowed a touch of irritation to come forth on his features. Enough that Will laughed at him, a sound Hannibal could not help but be fond of.

"She was difficult to find," Will said. "She was fleeing. Fleeing *you*, presumably. Did she have a reason to be?"

Hannibal considered his words carefully. "Bedelia has had a standing invitation to my dinner table for some time now," he finally said. No point in concealing such a fact from Will, who had no doubt read it from the both of them by now.

"I think she's considering vegetarianism these days," Will drawled. "She's not impressed by your usual fare."

"And yet she partook," Hannibal said. Something flickered over Will's face, an emotion too quick to catch. Jealousy, perhaps, though it may have been Hannibal was merely projecting his own hopes.

"Funny, how knowing what you were was never enough for her to do the right thing, until she was no longer the only one peeking behind the curtain."

"We all like to feel special. Everyone wants to believe they are the smartest person in the room."

"Well, whatever feeling was holding her back, it's gone now." Will swallowed the last of his wine, setting the glass aside. "She said..." here, for the first time, he hesitated. The look he gave Hannibal was uncertain, hesitant. "She said you would convince me to kill someone. Someone I loved. And that you would convince me there was no other choice."

"Perhaps she saw your fantasies written on your face," Hannibal said, with a glance towards Will's hands, resting on the arms of the chair, one hand tapping fingers against the upholstery.

"Hannibal."

"Bedelia did not love her patient, and to my knowledge, she has never killed anyone else," Hannibal said. "You surround yourself with very few people, Will, and I feel some measure of fondness for most of them. I would not try to coax you into ridding us of people I care for."

"You've already killed someone I love," Will said, "Someone *you* cared for."

Abigail. It always came back to Abigail. Not for the first time, Hannibal considered that life might be easier if he brought Will to the cliff house. If he let him see that Abigail lived and breathed, that she *thrived*.

But Will was still too much under Jack's thumb, too guilty to be given more than the tidbits he already had. The revelation that Hannibal had held on to more lies might be enough to make him vengeful.

No, better to have the reveal when they had already fled, when it was clear Will was complicit, even if Jack did not have the evidence to prove Hannibal's crimes.

Besides, Abigail had been looking forward to the surprise. She'd suggested a party.

"I have said before that I would undo it if I could," Hannibal told him.

"You have *implied* regret," Will said bitterly. "That doesn't mean you feel it."

There was a thin line to walk. Push Will too far away, and he would be pushed right into Jack's waiting arms. It would not do to have him grow ever spiteful about Abigail's alleged death.

Another lie, then, just one more. And one laced with truth, as all the best lies were.

"I regret what happened with Abigail," Hannibal said. "I regret that she cannot be here with us. I regret your hurt and anger. I regret the divide between us."

Or perhaps it was not a lie. Perhaps there was more truth than Hannibal had meant to say.

Oh, Will, he thought. *Look what you have done to me.*

Will looked at him, slightly wide-eyed, disbelieving. He reached for his glass, remembered it was empty, and set his hand back awkwardly in his lap.

"I wasn't expecting that, from you," Will admitted. "I thought... I worried at how easy it was for you. At how little it seemed to affect you. And then Bedelia..."

Will did not need to voice that particular worry. It was written in the guilt on his face, and though Hannibal wanted to be angry, he found he couldn't be. Will knew him both too well and not enough. It was a fear Hannibal would have had, in his position, the irrational fear of a parent whose need to protect ran deeper than their rationality could follow.

"Do you think I would harm Michelle? Even by proxy?"

Will looked at him for a long time, long enough that Hannibal felt discontent brewing in the pit of his stomach, long enough that he was certain he no longer wanted to hear Will's thoughts on the matter, whatever he may have thought about understanding.

"No," Will finally said. "No, not her."

———

Daddy was late to pick her up.

This happened, sometimes. Daddy was very, *very* busy, and Tėtis said he was not great at 'time management' to begin with. Michelle was getting impatient, because she *had* to tell Daddy about the latest horrible thing Tėtis had done to her. She knew Daddy would understand. *Fish. Jell-O.* Nobody in the whole entire wide world liked Fish Jell-O, Michelle didn't care what Tėtis and Mr. Crawford said. Fish Jell-O was gross, and disgusting, and it didn't matter that Tėtis had made her mac and cheese instead, she was still mad at him for offering it to her.

It would be alright, though. Daddy would be here soon enough, and she could tell him all about it, and maybe he would buy her a Happy Meal to make up for the injustice she had suffered. Until then, she was hanging out in the exit room, and Tėtis was doing paperwork alone in his office, so she wouldn't have to worry about hiding from patients.

Or she wasn't *supposed* to worry about it, anyway. She had her sketchbook, and her colored pencils, and she was drawing a picture for Abigail. That should have been all she had to do until Daddy came to get her.

And then the door opened.

The man in the door was tall, with wild blond hair that stuck up all over the place, like a cartoon character sticking a fork in an electrical socket. He looked familiar, but Michelle couldn't remember why, until he spoke.

"Hel*lo*, little one," he said, voice high. Cheerful? He seemed happy, he was doing all the physical parts of 'happy,' but there was something about his eyes when she could stand to glance at them. They were narrowed, sharp. She didn't understand the eyes.

"Hi?" Michelle said, cautiously.

"Do you remember me? We only met the one time, but you made *quite* the *impression*." He waved his arms when he spoke, just as vibrant and full of motion as the rest of him. And she did remember him, then, with a certainty that twisted unpleasantly in her belly.

"You came to Daddy's house," she said. "Daddy didn't let me stay."

"He *didn't*, did he?" the man said clapping his hands together. "Fathers are *so* over*protective*. My own father was ten times as strict, so I understand."

Michelle nodded, because it seemed like the right thing to do, and because it seemed like the man was expecting her to respond. He held out a hand.

"Mason Verger, at your service," he said. Michelle took his hand and shook it. It was awkward, with how much bigger it was than her own, and Mason gripped her a little too tight. She didn't like it. It felt like sandpaper underneath her skin. When he released her, she rubbed her hands together in her lap, over and over, trying to get rid of the feeling.

"Michelle Lecter," she said.

"Oh, I *know*," Mason said. "I've heard all about *you*. Bright young shining star, you are, your daddies must be *so* proud."

"I only have one Daddy," Michelle said, discomfort wriggling like worms inside of her. "And a Tėtis."

"*Tėtis*." Mason mimicked the word, slow and careful. " Tė-*tisss..."*

Michelle gave an uncertain nod.

"Wonderful for you, don't know what *I* would have done with *two* fathers. Committed patricide, probably."

"I... I don't know what that means," Michelle told him. It didn't seem to bother him. Mason plopped down into the seat beside her, sprawling across both it and the empty seat beside it.

"You know, your fathers and I are going to be very good friends," he said. "I've been sending gifts; did you get them?"

This, Michelle understood, and she perked up. "We got a pig, but nobody let me cook it."

"*Such* a shame," Mason said. "It's so hard to balance *work* and *home*, sometimes. I'll have to send another. And something for *you*, I think. A pretty dolly, perhaps?"

"I like dolls," Michelle assured him.

"*Excellent*," Mason said, with a smile that showed off lots and lots of shiny white teeth. Michelle tried to mimic the expression. It made her face hurt.

"You know," she said, trying to sound as polite and grown up as she could, "patients aren't supposed to come in this way. This is the exit. For privacy."

"Of *course*," Mason said, his smile smaller now, his eyes narrowed a little. "But this is a *surprise* visit for your Tėtis. It wouldn't be very *surprising* if I came the way he was *expecting*, would it?"

"I guess not."

"Of course it wouldn't." Mason reached into his pocket and pulled out a little foil wrapped packet. "Would you like a chocolate, Michelle?"

"Yes, please," she said happily. As she took the chocolate, the door opened, and Tėtis stood there looking... looking...

It was not an expression she had ever seen on Tėtis's face before. It alarmed her, even though she couldn't place it. *Especially* because she couldn't place it.

"Mason," Tėtis said, in a voice that was not his. "This exit is for my patients. As I recall, you declined to make a follow up visit."

"Oh, I just stopped by to say *hi*," Mason said. "Was in the neighborhood, and all that jazz."

"He gave me a chocolate!" Michelle piped up, holding up the little treat. "Can I eat it now?"

Tėtis stared at Mason. Mason grinned back at Tėtis, all teeth again. Nobody said anything. Michelle closed her hand around the chocolate, feeling it soften from the heat of her palm, even through the foil.

"After dinner," Tėtis said, in a stiff and unfamiliar voice. He held out his hand, and, reluctantly, Michelle dropped the foil square into it.

"Tell Daddy," she insisted. "So he doesn't forget."

"I will," Tėtis promised. "Mason, my apologies, I have further patients coming. I'm afraid there won't be time to catch up."

"Plenty of time later," Mason said, standing with a wild smile, stretching as he did. "Bring the little one, we'll have dinner and dessert. Bring the *whole family*, it'll be the event of the *season*."

"I'm not little," Michelle protested, but neither of them seemed to be listening to her. They were eyeing each other in that funny way grownups did, staring each other down. Michelle had no idea why grownups did that, talked to each other without using any words. She hated it. People talking with just their faces always left her out of the loop.

"Will and I will have to discuss it," Tėtis said, stressing Daddy's name, for some reason.

"By all means," Mason said. He patted Michelle on the head twice, messing up her hair and making her feel too crowded. Then he left, without even saying a proper goodbye.

"Was he rude?" Michelle asked, trying to parse the look on Tėtis's face.

"Exceptionally."

———

When they finally got a chance to talk about Mason, alone, without Michelle, Will broke a wine glass in his hand. Hannibal chided him for it as he cleaned glass from Will's cuts, but Will could not make himself feel sorry.

"I'll buy you another expensive glass."

"I don't care about the glass," Hannibal had said. "I care about you."

It had warmed Will right through, enough to settle him for the rest of the discussion. He'd left with no plan at all on how to manage Mason Verger, no closer to solving the dilemma he

presented, but he'd left feeling calmer than he had in a while. Amazing how Hannibal could at once be his greatest source of both stress *and* comfort.

Three days later, Hannibal decided to be stressful again.

Will arrived home late, after a long day at work, dodging Jack's questions and leaving him breadcrumbs that never quite led to the truth. It was enough to make him nauseous, nervous. He wanted all of this to be over, dealt with. He wanted to run away with Hannibal. He wanted Hannibal to go to fucking prison where he belonged. The thoughts did not mesh neatly.

The lights in the house were off, and the dogs were quiet. This was suspicious; they were never quiet when Will returned home after an exceedingly long day. They were well-trained, but if it had been a while since their last bathroom break, they usually mowed Will down in their rush to get outside. Today, he opened the door to nothing.

Well, almost nothing. The dogs *did* look up from their snack, reluctantly, to acknowledge his presence. It was a halfhearted thing, and then they went back to sniffing at the hand that fed them.

Mason Verger was in Will's easy chair, his face a bloody mess. Hannibal stood in the doorway, wiping his hands on a dish towel, clearly fresh from cleaning Will's kitchen without his permission. Again.

"Hannibal," Will said slowly, "what the *fuck*?"

"Mason wanted all of us to get together for dinner," Hannibal said. "Tonight seemed as good a night as any."

"You said we shouldn't cross him," Will pointed out. "You said he was too powerful to piss off."

"I'm sure I didn't," Hannibal said mildly. In that moment, Will wanted nothing more than to strangle him.

"Maybe not in so many words, but you certainly implied it!"

Hannibal glanced at Mason over Will's shoulders. "Mason was so *generous* in giving our daughter some of his homemade chocolates. I thought it only fair to return such a kindness."

The words did what they were meant to. Another burst of white-hot rage bubbled over in Will's chest, almost too much to bear. For a minute, it was *right* and *just* that Hannibal had brought Mason here, that they would be the ones to rid the world of him.

Rationality was difficult to draw back into himself. Will didn't want to be rational. He wanted to scream and rage and fight. He wanted to *kill*. That was the worst part, the wanting. The voice in his head urging him on, sounding less and less like Hannibal or Garrett Jacob Hobbs, and more and more like Will Graham.

They couldn't kill Mason. He was too high profile, and too closely connected to both of them, Will through Margot and Hannibal through his practice. Unless they wanted to flee the

country that very night, Mason had to walk out of here alive. Preferably with all the drugs out of his system.

"What did you give him?" Will turned to look at Mason, only to see a sliver of *something* disappear into Winston's mouth. "What... What is he feeding to my dogs? Mason? Mason! What did you just feed my dogs?"

"Take this, all of you, and eat of it," Mason intoned, "for this is my Body, which will be given up for you." He reached up, digging his knife into the skin of his cheek. Will felt sickened.

"He doesn't feel it," Hannibal assured him. "He's under the influence of a variety of psychedelic compounds."

"Wonderful," Will ground out. "*Don't* give that to the dogs," he added to Mason, who stilled with his hand extended, a sliver of flesh pinched between two fingers. After a moment-- during which Mason gave him a shifty eyed look reminiscent of a toddler who thinks you can't see them-- Mason dropped the meat and the dogs lunged.

"Oopsy-daisy," Mason sang.

"Would you care to explain *why* he's carving himself like a thanksgiving turkey?" Will said, crossing the room to snatch the knife from Mason's fingers. Mason pouted up at him.

"No no no, Daddy dearest, a *pig*."

"A *pig*," Will repeated, spite and disgust dripping from his voice.

"A *pig*," Mason repeated. Then, "I'm hungry."

Before Will could open his mouth, Hannibal chimed in. "Eat your nose, then."

Mason glanced down at his bloody hands, at the knife he held, and grinned. Will turned back to Hannibal.

"This is a whole new level of assault and battery," he hissed, unable to watch. Or unwilling, afraid he would take pleasure in the mutilation.

"I never laid a hand on him," Hannibal said. "I merely *suggested*."

"I know very well how persuasive you can be." Will sighed. Resentment still lingered on his tongue, acrid and bitter. "It won't matter to Jack."

"Jack needn't know."

Will gestured impatiently to Mason, faceless and wide-eyed with wonder at it all. It was nauseating to look at, but Will found his emotions tilted more towards disgust at how pitifully easily Mason had fallen under Hannibal's spell. "How are you going to hide this, Hannibal?"

Hannibal looked at him, long and searching, intimate enough to bring heat to Will's cheeks. Will knew exactly how Hannibal would have preferred to hide this, and the temptation reared within him, the rumble of blood lust that had coursed through his veins the night he killed Randall Tier.

Mason deserved it. If anyone in the world deserved to be a Ripper victim, deserved to be *Will's* victim, it was Mason Verger. But they couldn't. They would never get away with it. "We can't," Will said, and perhaps he should have been ashamed of how soft it sounded, how reluctant. Perhaps it should have worried him more than it did, that his stomach didn't twist and writhe with as much guilt as it should have.

Perhaps.

"Of course," Hannibal said. If he was disappointed, he hid it well. He nodded as though Will's answer was the only sensible one. It *was* the only sensible one, it was just weird that Hannibal was acknowledging it. "We should get him ready for trip home."

"So, your plan is to, what, drop him off before curfew so his Daddy doesn't bring the shotgun out to meet us?"

"Have I ever told you how fond I am of your turns of phrase?"

A tiny smile tugged at the corner of Will's mouth. "Now isn't the time for flirtation, Hannibal."

"We will deliver Mason to his doorstep, safe and as sound as necessary."

"How do you know he won't hunt us down?"

"He'll remember very little of this night, overall," Hannibal said. "And what he *does* remember is likely to incense him."

"That's *worse*," Will pointed out. "A spiteful, vengeful Mason Verger, wearing evidence written on his skin?"

"Mason is not the type to let others do his revenge *for* him. At least, not if they're going to do it somewhere he can't see. Prison would not be enough for him. He would want to see us suffer."

Will felt like he was talking to a brick well. That was *still worse*. Suffering was, in Will's opinion, nearly as bad as prison. Worse, if Mason chose to prolong it, which he likely would.

"And by the time he is fit enough to attempt it, we will be long gone," Hannibal finished. Will swallowed. Nausea made itself known, bubbling up in the pit of his stomach, as it always did when he thought about fleeing the country to all but marry a serial killer. A heavy, twisted mass made up of eagerness, anticipation, and a healthy dose of shame. He felt more guilt at the idea of running away with a man he loved than he did over the idea of killing Mason Verger.

But then again, Mason Verger was a monster, and so was the man Will loved.

"Handle this," Will said, in lieu of a proper answer. "Get him out of my house, before he makes my dogs sick."

Hannibal cupped Will's face in both hands. Will hated how weak-kneed it made him, how much he wanted to relax into the touch, despite Mason drugged and mutilated not five feet away.

"Soon," Hannibal murmured, close enough to be all Will saw. "Soon, there will be nothing more to worry about."

He left Will standing there, dazed, as he walked over to Mason...

And snapped his neck.

———

Will was quiet as they drove Mason home, but he seemed to regain some of his vigor when Margot met him at the door.

"I brought you a present," he said, with a smile that was all teeth. Margot looked at Mason in Hannibal's arms, limp and whimpering. Nothing showed on her face, no shock, no gratitude, no horror.

"What lovely gift wrapping," she murmured. "What's the occasion?"

"Condolences," Will suggested. "We were so sorry to hear about Mason's unfortunate fall. Right into the pig pens, he never stood a chance. I hope they can do something about his spine."

Margot couldn't seem to look away, though her face stayed carefully blank. Years of camouflaging her feelings had served her well, and now it was impossible to tell what she was thinking.

Will, on the other hand, had his nerves written across every inch of him, down the the hand that tapped away at his thigh in a subtle, repetitive motion. Margot looked at him, and something in her face shifted and softened. Will's life and freedom rested in her hands now, and while Hannibal knew what he had coaxed forth from Margot, Will did not.

Will's shoulders only relaxed when Margot turned and begain to walk away. "Come with me," she called over her shoulder. "I'll show you where he fell."

———

In the days to follow, Will seemed to surge from one emotion to the next. First, he was anxious, waiting to be caught, waiting for Margot to turn them in. Then, he would shift into relief, a hint of a thrill at having gotten away with such things. Then, excitement, pleasure, a longing for Hannibal that Hannibal could *feel*.

And then the guilt would return, and the cycle would begin anew.

Hannibal planned, and sketched, and tried to be patient. He had settled the date on their plane tickets. It was clear to him they would need to leave sooner, rather than later, before the thin thread of morality Will still clung to guided him back into Jack Crawford's waiting arms.

Abigail would be the final push to force Will's hand. He would be angry, no doubt, but the more Hannibal considered it, the more certain he was that Will would not be able to resist, once he knew his family was entirely whole again. He knew she and Michelle looked forward to the revelation; they were both developing a fondness for sneakiness that Hannibal intended to cultivate.

But until then, Will's uncertainty was... Not quite frustrating, for Hannibal understood the reasoning, but perhaps stressful.

"Do you love me?"

Will's voice broke the silence, shattered the thread of thought that Hannibal had been following. When Hannibal looked up from his sketch, he was red, a hand scratching nervously at his jaw, the other hand twisting against his hip. Little tells that read out exactly how difficult a question it was for Will to ask. Hannibal set his charcoal aside.

"I've told you before how I feel about you."

Will turned to face him, challenge in his eyes, a frown at the corner of his mouth. "Answer the question, Hannibal. You dance carefully around anything that might make you look human. Don't do that to me."

It was a cutting remark, but not judgmental; they both knew who and what Hannibal was, neither had any delusions of that changing. Hannibal watched the shift of Will's features and came to a decision.

"I do love you," he said, with an honesty that *hurt*, sharp against his tongue. "I think perhaps I had never loved anyone before you, romantically."

"Perhaps?"

"I thought I did, once," Hannibal told him, allowing thoughts of the Lady Murasaki to come to the surface, thoughts he typically kept buried beneath layers of time and distance. He had thought little of her since her death. It was better that way. "Knowing you as I do, I now believe it was an infatuation."

Will nodded, his gaze thoughtful. Hannibal considered him for a long moment. He could not have said, entirely *why* he loved Will. How they ended up in this position. Will's brilliance, his attractiveness, his love for Michelle, the darkness that dwelled within him, waiting to be pulled free. All of these were enticing qualities.

But Hannibal had never before been enticed, not by any beauty or darkness that crossed his path. That it was *Will* who managed it seemed entirely circumstance, a twist of fate that Hannibal had never expected to be subject to.

Will came to stand beside him, looking down at the sketch Hannibal had carefully reproduced. He'd changed a few things, placed a fuller head of curls over Patroclus than the original painting had held. An unexpected whim he'd seen no reason not to fulfill.

"*Achilles Lamenting The Death Of Patroclus*," Hannibal said, sliding the paper over a bit for Will to inspect. He watched Will's eyes trace over the lines, taking each streak of charcoal. Will huffed out a laugh, with little humor to it.

"Patroclus became Achilles on the field of war."

"And the consequences ended the Trojan war."

"They also ended Achilles."

Hannibal hummed his agreement. "Achilles wished all Greeks would die so that he and Patroclus could conquer Troy alone. Took divine intervention to bring them down."

"They shared an intimacy that scholars have puzzled over," Will agreed. He reached out towards the sketch, then, thankfully, thought better of it. He placed his hand on the desk instead, leaning over to inspect the drawing further.

"You and I feel so intertwined," Hannibal ventured. The look on Will's face made the vulnerability worth it; there was a genuine pleasure there that warmed Hannibal.

"Sometimes," Will confided, voice low, as if they might be overheard, "I can't seem to find where you end, and I begin."

Hannibal liked the sound of it, a breach of individual separateness, breaking down the walls between them. He wanted to pry open Will's skull and live inside it, knowing him so thoroughly.

"Would that be so terrible?" He asked. A heartbeat. Two.

"No."

Chapter End Notes

If nothing else, at least taking this long to write meant I understood more about Achilles and Patroclus by the time I got to that scene.

The next chapter isn't going to be nearly as long (this was TEN THOUSAND WORDS???), so hopefully I crank it out faster. We're looking at a short wrap-up, but then we get into Book 3 and the real meat of the story. I'm excited!

I have Things to say about this chapter but it's spoilery so I'll save it for next time.

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Warnings in the end notes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Hannibal has invited me to dinner."

Will stared down at the neat little envelope, wax seal carefully pried up, and felt hateful.

It was one thing to know that Hannibal and Jack both manipulated him for their own purposes. It was another to be confronted with the evidence.

Hannibal manipulated everyone, of course, and going behind Will's back was far from the worst thing he'd ever done, but it still chafed at Will.

Jack forcing his hand was another matter entirely. Will was just so damn tired of being everyone's favorite pawn.

"I have SWAT on standby. I have a ground team ready at a moment's notice. I'm just waiting on you, Will."

"Everybody's settling in for dinner," Will mused, staring blankly at Jack's desk.

"Or trying to," Jack said. He sighed, leaning back in his chair. He looked old before his time, grey creeping into the close crop of his hair. Lines were beginning to etch themselves across his face, the bedrock worn away by sea and wind and time. "You've given me so little, Will."

"Hannibal is clever. It will take time to get him to open himself up in that way."

"I gave you time," Jack said, running a palm over his face, smoothing out the stress. "I'm fresh out of time. I have the bureau breathing down my neck, chomping at the bit to tear me to shreds for some of the liberties I've given you."

Randall Tier whispered in the dark over Will's shoulder. So did the regret of leaving Clark Ingram to the authorities. They blurred together, a tableau of Will's sins.

"Hannibal trusts me," Will said. "With his home, with his child. Eventually, he'll trust me with this."

Jack sighed. "I can't wait around for 'eventually,' Will. Hannibal doesn't need time to plan another dinner party. Or have you forgotten what he did to Beverly Katz?"

Will flinched in his seat. He hadn't, not really, but he had let it... slip from his mind. The memory flowed through his fingers like water, unwilling to be held in place. He already mourned Abigail. It hurt less to put Beverly away, to pretend as though she'd never existed. He tried not to think about just how much Hannibal had been forgiven for.

"You know I haven't."

"Do I?"

Jack and Will stared each other down, each searching for secrets in the minute twitches of their expressions. Will saw nothing he didn't already know, and tried to keep his own face as free of honesty as possible.

Finally, Jack heaved another sigh. "Hannibal has been talking about inviting Bella and me to dinner for a while now. I've expressed nothing less than delight at the opportunity. I intend to take him up on this invitation."

"You're going to involve Bella in this?"

"Of course not," Jack snapped. "She'll be unwell the day of. I'll leave her at home to rest. I'll go in with a wire. I'll be ready to pry a confession from him. All I need is to know what buttons to push.

Will nodded, leaning back in his seat. "Just tell me what you need me to do, Jack."

"I need you to be there with me. I need you to get closer.

———

"Do you know what you're doing?" Will asked over wine. Hannibal had poured himself a slightly larger measure than usual, foreseeing the conversation that was unfolding.

"Having dinner with a friend."

Will leaned against the fireplace, swirling his wine in his glass. "Jack intends for this dinner to be the last."

"I know very well what Jack intends," Hannibal said. "You've spared no detail, that I can tell."

Will took a sip of his wine, too quick to savor. His nervousness seeped out into the room, but without a hint of dishonesty. Will was nervous *for* him, not because of him.

Well, perhaps a little because of him. Hannibal knew Will considered him too reckless, to driven by emotion and the desire to prove his might by taking Jack down. He could never see how carefully Hannibal had everything arranged, how every decision was based in logic and careful planning. It was the sole place where their halves never seemed to meet.

"I can't protect you from them," Will said quietly. "If you slip up, even a fraction, Jack will jump on it. My influence barely spreads to Jack, these days. It does not cover SWAT or the rest of the FBI."

"I don't need you to protect me," Hannibal said, his tone as gentle as he could make it. He was out of practice when it came to providing comfort. For so long, the only person who had needed it was an elementary school aged child. "They have no evidence, Will. Nothing more than circumstance. You've given them nothing, and I certainly don't intend to confess."

Will's hand clenched into a fist against the shelf above the fireplace. "This is my family," he said. "You... you are my family."

An urge came to Hannibal, unfamiliar and rusted over. He wanted to go to Will, to soothe over the aches he felt. He wanted to hold him.

This was what came of fatherhood, of emotional relationships. Hannibal could not reconcile feelings and logic. Will was a grown man. He did not need Hannibal to wipe his tears away and check under his bed for monsters.

But the desire lingered. Hannibal could not force it away. And what harm was a single indulgence, when he fully intended to indulge in Will as often as allowed, later.

He stood. Took a step. Another. Will looked up at him with hollow, distant eyes, lost in whatever dread he'd fallen into.

Hannibal opened his arms, and Will fit so neatly into them. Perhaps they had always fit so well. Will was stiff, at first, but gradually he fell into Hannibal. They merged.

"Tell me about Europe," Will muttered. This, Hannibal understood.

"I've rented us a cottage, to start with. Two bedrooms, alongside a lake. You can fish on the days we don't look at homes together. Michelle will be tutored at home, at first, until she learns the language..."

———

Isolation seemed to have done Freddie some good. Perhaps distance from the darkness she shrouded herself in was good for the soul. Her hair seemed brighter, the coils more vivid and shiny. She still dressed like she might be recognized at any moment. Will sat on the couch in the room she'd been put up in, staring at the closed laptop on the coffee table.

"I'm going to enjoy my resurrection," she said, settling down beside him. "You should, too. I've been filling up notebooks. Nothing sells better than a survival story."

"I wouldn't count us as survivors just yet, Freddie," Will grimaced.

"We will be," Freddie assured him. "And I'll even let you tell me your story. I can paint such a lovely picture of you. Better than how the rest of the world will see you otherwise."

"I didn't come here to talk about me," he said. She looked at him, head tilted, eyes narrowed and knowing.

"No," she said. "No, I didn't think you did. It didn't seem like you. You're more of the 'react later' type, trying to mend the damage after it's been wrought. If you bother at all. Some people don't. Always got under my skin a bit."

"You don't need to butter me up to write whatever you want about me," Will said, with a roll of his eyes. "I don't care if I get under your skin or not. I only care about one thing. Well," he amended, "two things."

"Michelle Lecter," Freddie said. "And Abigail Hobbs?"

"Don't write about them."

Freddie blinked, and something about her expression was unreadable to him. No, not unreadable. It was very difficult to hide emotions from Will, no matter how practiced one was at it.

Unexpected.

There was sympathy, in the quirk of her lips, pity in the narrowing of her eyes. Guilt, in the way she pulled at the hem of her skirt, straightening out imaginary lines.

"They're central to the plot," Freddie said, in a voice that carried none of the hostility or ill-will he might have expected from her. She sounded, if anything, exceedingly patient. Understanding.

Will's world had tilted sideways when he met Hannibal Lecter, and every day it seemed to turn a little bit more. It seemed to him that he was upside down, right now, clinging desperately to the floor to avoid falling. "They're innocent," he said. "They don't deserve to be tainted with the same brush as us."

"Us," Freddie said, her voice steady and sharp. "You really don't think you're going to survive him, do you?"

Will looked away. "Will any of us?" he asked. "Is there anyone who has not been irrevocably changed by all of this?"

“You’ve grown paternal instinct,” Freddie suggested. “As protective as any father over his daughters. It’s more than I expected from you.”

“Abigail wasn’t my daughter,” Will said, a bitter truth that did nothing to ease the pain of her loss. “And after the dust settles, Michelle won’t be, either. I have no legal claim to her. With Hannibal in jail, she’ll go to foster care.”

Freddie tilted her head, eyes sharp, all-seeing. She would have been an excellent journalist, had she been able to resist the call of tabloid popcorn writing. “You don’t intend to apply?”

“Who would pass me?” Will asked. “Even if we forget the incarceration-

“-you were exonerated on all charges-“

“-and the ‘instability,’ there’s the long hours, the lack of familial support, the fact that I sleep in my living room…”

“You sleep in your living room?” Freddie asked. He could practically see her hands itching for a pen.

"Freddie. Please."

She looked as if no one had ever said the word to her, thunderstruck. She blinked for a moment, and then slowly, her fidgeting hands settled in her lap.

“It is… impossible, to tell the story without them,” she told him. “But I can promise to keep it brief. A passing mention. And I can promise not to name Michelle.”

It wasn’t enough, and even still, it was more than he’d expected her to offer him. Will was amazed to find humanity in Freddie, kindness in her voice. She had, in her own way, been fond of Abigail. And even Freddie could have compassion for a child.

“Write whatever you want about me,” he told her, an olive branch. “And whatever you like about Hannibal.”

Her eyes narrowed, not suspicion, but concern. “You really don’t think you’re going to survive him, do you?”

Will certainly hoped not. Wherever Hannibal went, he wanted to follow. Difficult as the choice could sometimes be.

———

They took Hannibal’s patient notes home with them to burn. There was a fireplace in the office, but this way, they could put Michelle to bed and eke out a small amount of privacy.

“You intend to make yourself unreadable,” Will noted, running his fingers over Hannibal’s neat, tiny writing. It left indentations in the pages, as if Will could feel the memory of the sessions under his fingertips.

“We can only take so much with us, when we leave,” Hannibal said. “And one day, perhaps even in my lifetime, someone may begin to question my pathology. My patients don’t deserve the scrutiny.”

And they were more evidence. Proof that Hannibal had been slowly slipping under people’s skin for years.

Will tossed the book into the fire and caught the next one. This one only had a few pages of writing before it suddenly and unexpectedly stopped. “These are your notes on me,” he realized.

“They are.”

Will flipped through, skimming the scant pages for things he recognized. “Where are the rest of our sessions?”

“I stopped taking notes when we began to lean more towards friendship than a professional relationship.” Hannibal gathered a few more books in his arms, carefully making his way down the ladder. “There was nothing I needed to write down that I could not just as easily remember for myself.”

Will felt a burst of shocked pleasure, fizzing bubbles in his chest like a gulp of champagne. There were times when Hannibal surprised him, said something that caught him completely off guard. Their relationship sometimes felt more like a daydream than reality, as if any minute he would wake up and find that Hannibal had played him.

Trust was hard to come by, for Will, and harder with the things he and Hannibal had been through… But there was still a sliver of it left in Will’s heart. What they held between them was as real as anything Will had ever touched before. It shouldn’t have been, Will should have run fast and far long before now, but there it was.

Will tugged Hannibal in to steal a kiss and threw the book into the fire.

———

“What are we going to do with *her?”* Abigail asked him the next time he saw her, “We can’t really take her with us.”

Hannibal had thought about it, long and hard. Just as he had thought about what they planned to do with Jack.

There was no way to keep Will and also keep his secrets. The walls were closing in, and though Hannibal did not intend to be here when they finally came together, it did not stop the feeling of pressure caving in on him.

He had worked so long and so hard for everything he had. He was proud of how easily he’d slipped through the FBI’s clutches at every turn.

But he was getting older, day by day, a little at a time. This was the only life they had to live. He wanted to spend it with his family.

And there was nothing stopping him from resuming his activities once they were settled with new identities.

“I have been working with her since she came to us. If we are lucky, she will remember nothing,” Hannibal said. “Which means she will not remember *you*, and your presence will provide our family the alibi we need. If they’re going to search for me, they will be searching for two men and a child. Two men and their two daughters will bring less scrutiny.”

Abigail frowned, turning to look out the window, towards the cliff over the sea. “So we just… let her go?”

“Would you propose we try and keep her?”

Abigail shook her head, but the haunted look did not leave her eyes. It was a gamble, releasing Beverly Katz back into the world, but one they would have to take. They had already promised not to kill her, to snuff out her light like it would be so easy to do. Hannibal had to admit, the world was a better place with Beverly Katz in it. He admired her, what he'd seen of her. He did not like to waste life unnecessarily; his table was for the rude, the pigs of the world.

"Whatever comes next, we'll do it together," he promised her.

Abigail stared out at the sea, and nodded.

———

There were still steps Will had to take. People he had to see. Goodbyes he had to manage without making them obvious.

"I feel poisoned," Alana told him, and he felt tar in his veins, gumming them up.

"We are all poisoned."

Alana flinched. It hadn't been meant to bite at her, but bite it did, jaws snapping shut around her heart.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I have no right to feel tainted when you… We never even slept together, beyond literal sleep. But you…"

"Hannibal creeps in under your skin," Will told her, and it was the most honest he'd been in weeks. "He gets to the heart of you. He does it on purpose. If you feel tainted, it is because he wanted to taint you."

"I'm sorry I didn't believe you," she said. "I'm sorry I trusted… That I-"

Will cut her off, holding up a hand. He did not want to hear her apologize again for an affair that had, technically, gone nowhere. He didn't want to think about it at all. If he thought about it, he had to think about Hannibal, about his motivations, about the way he had so easily manipulated someone they both considered a friend. Alana should never have played a part in the affair, but it was Hannibal who Will blamed.

It was a train of thought he didn't want to indulge anymore, after too many sleepless nights thinking about it.

"What's done is done," Will said, "and forgiveness was already granted. You don't need to still be sorry, Alana. I know what he did to you. What he did to both of us."

Alana looked like she would go to her grave still sorry, like apologetic was a new facet of her personality, never to ease or fade. He hoped she forgave herself, eventually. Maybe it would be easier, when they left, and she saw Will had been playing her as well.

Another stab of guilt. They came slower, now, less venom in their bite, but they still came. Will was not Hannibal, who could cut himself so easily off from the world. He was learning

to see things differently, or at least to prioritize the family he wanted so desperately over a society that had never made space for him. Still, he struggled. He was only human. Hannibal was… something else.

“You and Jack have a trap set for Hannibal,” Alana said, her fingers tugging at the creases in her skirt. “How do you know the trap hasn’t been set for you, instead?”

“With Hannibal, you never know,” Will told her. “We just have to be faster. Keep one step ahead of him.”

“You’re never one step ahead of Hannibal,” she warned. “Will, what you’re doing is dangerous. You walk through the shadows for too long, and the shadows may try to keep you.”

He was already kept, held in darkness, in the warmth of another person with nothing but the night around them.

“I guess,” he said slowly, “you’re going to have to trust me.”

She looked at him, cocked her head slightly, and he wondered if she could.

———

They were going to Italy. Daddy didn’t know yet, it was a surprise. He knew they were leaving, but he didn’t know when, or where. Michelle knew. She had seen the tickets. The passports. Hers had a funny name on it—Magdalena. Magdalena was not her name, but Jakob was not Tėtis’s name, and Henry was not Daddy’s, and Christina was not Abigail’s. They would all have new names, new lives.

They would disappear into the countryside first, until ‘the heat died down,’ so she guessed they would be there all summer. Eventually, when people didn’t look so hard for them, they would be able to go back to normal things like school and work.

Michelle wasn’t sure she wanted to go back to normal things. She thought she might like living in the country with just her and Daddy and Tėtis and Abigail.

She was counting down the days. She had drawn a little calendar on construction paper and every night she crossed out one more.

Soon. It was almost here.

———

The phone rang while Will was trying to make himself put on his shoes. While he was still wavering over how he was going to get through this night. While he was still uncertain if he could really kill Jack Crawford.

“Alana?” he asked, clearing his throat when it came out raspy and uncertain.

“The FBI has issued a warrant for your arrest,” she said, without hesitation. “For being an accessory to entrapment… and for the murder of Randall Tier.”

And there it was. The decision, already made for him. The hourglass had finally run out of sand, and the consequences were catching up to him. He thought he could hear sirens in the distance, but maybe that was the sudden burst of fear and adrenaline.

“Thank you,” he choked out, shoving his feet into his dress shoes. There was no time to pack. No time to arrange anything for the dogs. He tried not to think about them, even as they milled around his feet; it hurt too much.

“Don’t,” she said, raw and pained. “Don’t thank me.”

“*Thank you*,” he repeated, more firmly.

“I’m so sorry.”

He hung up on her then, already fumbling to dial another number. He wasn’t going to get there in time. They would go without him. He would never see Michelle or Hannibal again.

But they would be *safe*.

He heard the dogs whining as he bolted for the car, and he told himself they would be okay. Alana would care for them again. She had before. She *owed* him.

“Will,” Hannibal said, warm and rich and *home*.

“They know,” Will told him, shattering everything.

———

Michelle was hiding, and trying to remember how to breathe. Everything was loud, so loud. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. This wasn’t how it was supposed to *be*.

The world was ending.

———

There was a body on Hannibal’s front step. Will’s first thought was ‘Jack,’ though the shape and size were wrong.

It was Alana, sprawled across the concrete, staring blankly up ahead, her face full of shock. She was still breathing, still blinking. Will called for an ambulance, his fingers numb.

Alana had not been part of the plan. Alana had *never* been part of the plan. Will harbored no ill will towards Alana, whatever she may have thought. He *liked* her, even now, even after everything.

Alana was meant to be their friend. Or as close to friendship as Hannibal ever managed, outside of Will.

Will had thought her to be an exception.

He had thought *himself* to be an exception, and doubt was a heavy weight in his stomach.

“Go,” Alana whispered to him. “You have to go.”

Will covered her with his coat and turned to meet his fate.

———

What was the difference, between self-defense and murder? Michelle didn’t know. She kept staring at the broken window, as if it would give her the answer.

She hadn’t liked Dr. Bloom, not anymore. But she hadn’t wanted to *hurt* her either.

Abigail had pushed her. Abigail had sent her through the window. The window was broken, and they would never be able to unbreak it, not ever.

“Shelly,” Abigail said, fast and urgent. “We need to go. We need to go *now*.”

Abigail took her by the hand and Michelle clutched tight and let herself be led.

———

There was blood all over Hannibal’s immaculate kitchen, shattered glass. Hannibal was nowhere to be found, and Will prayed, he *prayed*, that the blood was not his.

Please, he thought, to a deity he did not believe in, *please, after everything else, not this*.

There were two exits out of the kitchen. Will turned towards the one to the hallway, and found his way blocked.

Two pairs of shoes, one a tiny pair of white trainers, the other a sturdy pair of boots. Too small to be Hannibal’s. Will looked up, past Michelle’s blank, shuttered expression, up, up.

Abigail Hobbs looked back at him, frightened, pale.

“Abigail,” he breathed.

“I didn’t know what to do,” she said, a child afraid of parental disappointment. “I didn’t know… So I just did what he told me to.”

Hannibal.

Hannibal had lied to him.

Hannibal had framed him for a crime that had never even happened.

All the feelings Will had been pushing down for the sake of their relationship had been for *nothing*.

Hannibal had *lied*.

Abigail was alive.

Will wanted to cross the room, to drag her into a hug, to pull both girls close to him and never let go.

He wanted to get his hands on Hannibal and… and…

Will didn't know what he wanted to do. He felt anger, rage, white hot.

And relief so fierce it brought tears to his eyes.

"Abigail," he said again. She flinched, as if his words had stabbed at her.

Beside her, Michelle looked empty. Hollowed out. Will took a step towards her.

"Will."

Will whirled around to face the other doorway. Hannibal, bloody and bruised, but whole. Alive.

Liar, Will's brain hissed. *Betrayer.*

"You were supposed to *leave*," Will said, instead of giving voice to any of those things.

"We couldn't go without you."

A crazed laugh bubbled up in Will's chest. He swallowed it, shaking his head. "They're coming," he said. "You should have. You should have been long gone by now, they're going to find *all of this* and there will be no more hiding.

"I knew when I agreed to leave with you that my days in the shadows were numbered," Hannibal said. He reached for Will, cupped his jaw. Will wanted to kiss him. More than that, he wanted to tear his head from his shoulders.

"We have to go," Abigail said behind him. "Hannibal. I hear sirens."

"She's right," Will said. "You need to go."

Hannibal didn't look as startled as he should have. Will's mind had not been made up until this minute.

But now he knew, he knew he couldn't go. Alana was dying on the front steps. Jack was dying somewhere else in the house. Abigail, *Abigail* was whole and unharmed, at least physically.

He couldn't trust Hannibal. And Hannibal looked as though he'd been expecting it.

"Go!" Will said again. "Before somebody shows up with handcuffs."

“You’re not coming with us?”

Michelle’s voice, quiet, broken. She looked at him with sudden focus, snapped out of her daze.

“I *can’t*,” Will said, and it hurt, it *hurt*. But he couldn’t. Everything had been turned on its head. He couldn’t go.

But he couldn’t see Hannibal behind bars, either. Whatever his anger, whatever his fear, Will’s love remained steadfast.

———

Hannibal had always suspected they would end up here.

There was a beautiful darkness inside Will, but it was buried under so much fear, so much shame. There had always been the chance that Will would pull away at the last second.

He should have sent Abigail to Italy ahead of them. It was too much to hope that Will would bear her revival with grace rather than anger.

“If you let us go, you will look guilty,” Hannibal told him, one last attempt.

“I don’t care!” Will said, sealing their fates. “I already look guilty.”

“I do.”

Hannibal pulled him in, kissing him one last time, slow and sweet. He could feel Will shudder beneath his touch, and he wanted to hold that feeling in his grasp and never let go.

Then he carved an alibi into Will’s stomach with the knife he held.

Will made a sound, choked and watery and *beautiful*. Hannibal had always held an urge to kill him, to consume him, it was just that his urge to have Will beside him was stronger.

Will suffering was an art piece. Hannibal lowered him to the floor, helped him to lean against the island even as Will clutched at his stomach.

“Hannibal,” he gasped.

“Save your strength,” Hannibal told him. He stood, turning back to his children. “Abigail, let’s go.”

She didn’t move, staring wide-eyed at Will.

“Abigail.

But she looked from him and then back to Will, to the blood oozing through his shirt, and shook her head.

“I,” she said. “I…”

Her hand slipped free of Michelle's, even as Michelle whimpered and grasped after her. Abigail turned away.

And she ran.

He heard the front door slam against the wall, heard the call of sirens.

The best laid plans, in ruins at his feet. Hannibal scooped Michelle up. She went limply, her eyes closing as she pressed her face to his neck. She was heavy; he could not remember her ever being this heavy.

"Hannibal," Will gasped. Hannibal looked down, and met dark, broken eyes.

"She deserves better than both of us," Will said. Hannibal tightened his grip on his daughter.

"You ask too much of me, Will."

Will laughed, though it must have pained him. "I never asked enough."

That was the memory that etched itself into Hannibal's brain, as he stepped out into the rain. That was how he would remember Will, angry and hurting. Bleeding out on the kitchen floor.

Hannibal turned and began to make his way down the street. The ambulance drove right past him.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings for Mizumono style violence, and lots of trauma.

We finally arrive at the end of book two! I said at the beginning that Mizumono would be the same, but slightly different. I have been planning this moment since the very first chapter. In my head it is my favorite scene, but I'm not sure I did it justice.

A last note, and I know y'all are sick of my lectures but there's always one person ruining it for everyone: Your negative comments are unnecessary and unwanted. If you don't like my fic, that's fine. There's the door. See yourself out.

I will see you all soon for Italy, where some things will change and others will stay the same. Abigail is alive. Beverly Katz is alive. Michelle is in Italy.

Let's see how it goes.

Works inspired by this one

Ish's attempt to be Strats by Ishxallxgood

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!